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The background of the entire page is a promotional image for the video game Star Wars Outlaws. It features the characters Lando Calrissian, a droid, and a young girl walking through a desert landscape with a city in the background. The title 'STAR WARS OUTLAWS' is overlaid on the image in large, stylized letters.

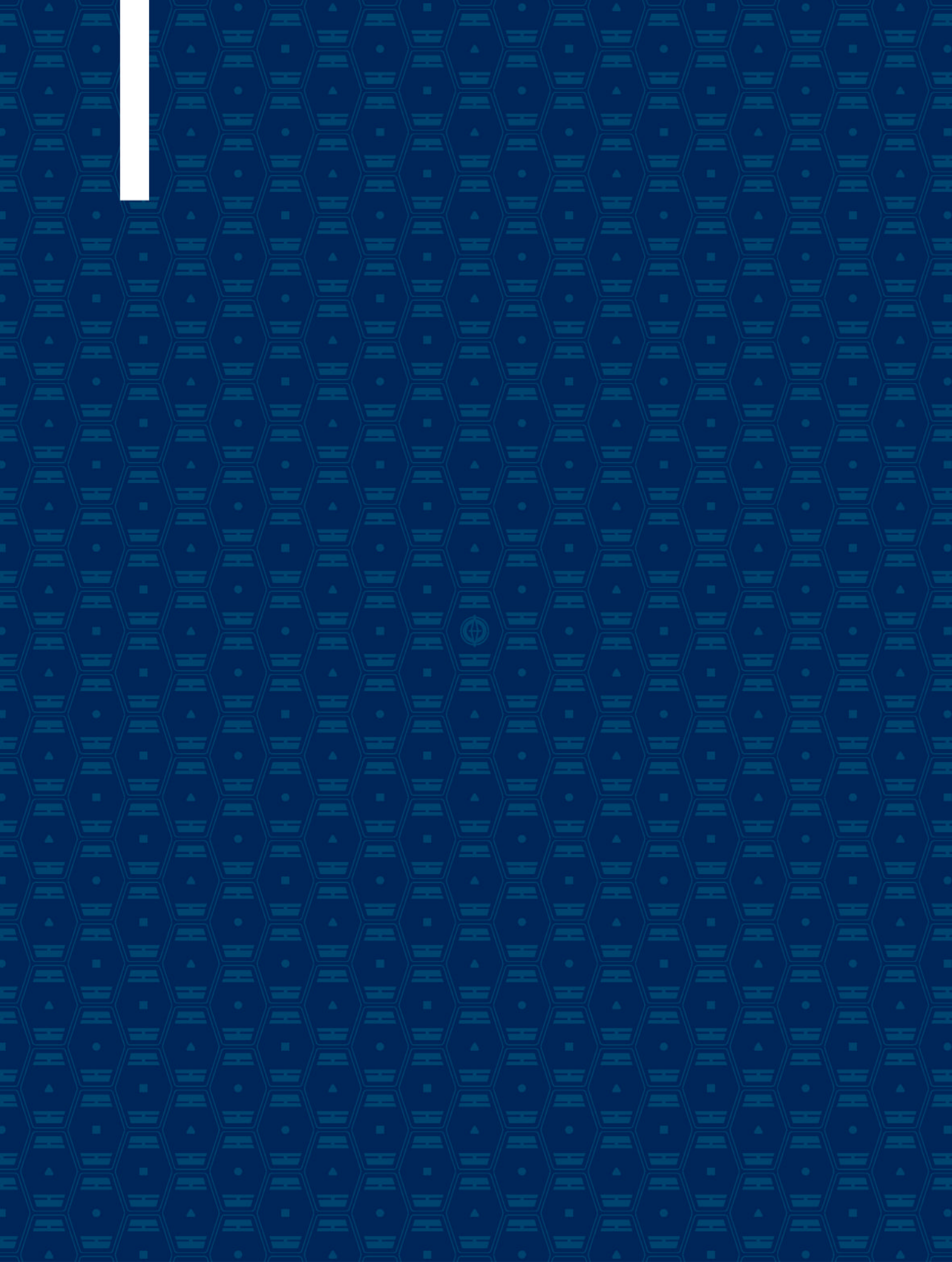
STAR WARS OUTLAWS

UBISOFT'S DARING OPEN-WORLD
ADVENTURE LEADS OUR LINEUP OF
THE 100 NEW GAMES TO WATCH

PLUS

APPLE'S VISION PRO
AND AR GAMING
FINAL FANTASY XVI
INTERACTIVE FILMS'
UNLIKELY REVIVAL

#387
SEPTEMBER 2023



Everybody needs a 16bit-style sprite for a pillow

Has a big-budget game series ever made as significant a shift in direction as *Final Fantasy XVI*? *Zelda*'s transition from *Skyward Sword*'s structure to the open sprawl of *Breath Of The Wild* was a rush, but the core beats retained a familiarity that does not exist in *Final Fantasy*'s case. *Fallout 2*'s progression to its sequel might be a better example, although that was a more naturally evolutionary step, the 1998 release's isometric 3D making way for realtime polygons ten years later. The segues from *Resident Evil 3* to *4* and, especially, *6* to *7* feel more like overt creative decisions, unafraid to overturn expectations. These are risks, and it is amusing to see *Final Fantasy XVI* concede this point in how its UI represents the current members of your party – not with the headshots you might expect, but with full-body sprites rendered in jumbo pixels, as if they've been plucked right out of 1994's *Final Fantasy VI*. Against the backdrop of such palpable change, these hits of unalloyed nostalgia feel like pillows placed behind the player's head: "Yes, things are different, but look, remember these? That's right – just like the old ones. Sit back. Everything's going to be OK."

Square Enix has been making hay out of its heritage ever since it put out its first sequel, but in modern times it's become more explicit, the success of the *Octopath Traveller* series' so-called HD-2D visuals paving the way for *Star Ocean: The Second Story R*, a remake that pushes vintage sprite design even harder. That its debut trailer was met with almost universal enthusiasm will see more games follow suit. Yes, the audience says, we'd like our remakes to take advantage of modern hardware – but can you do it so that they also feel like they're old at the same time? Thanks.

In the case of *Star Wars: Outlaws*, the debt to the past is paid right at its centre, with a story set between the events of *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*. Ubisoft Massive doesn't have any old-fashioned sprites to fall back on, but it is spending some of its many resources in crafting a suite of era-faithful visual effects. Our cover story begins on p78.



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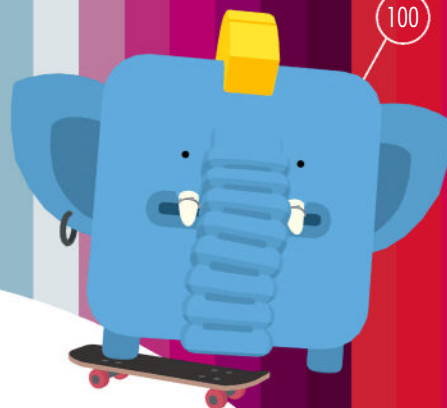
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Shadow of the colossus

With E3 struck off the calendar, **what's left of the biggest week in videogames?**

Deferred pleasure was always the driving force of E3, as the industry decamped to California for a tantalisingly brief taste of coming attractions. But you're not, surely, supposed to leave thinking primarily about the future of the show itself.

This began with last June's incarnation, the first with Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest stepping into the hole left by E3's cancellation not just online but in person, in the old ancestral home of LA. Play Days was an embryonic event, but for understandable reasons, and ►



Between Richard Aoyade in *Fable's* trailer, *Like A Dragon's* not-quite-full-frontal nudity, and the incongruity of *Palworld*, does 2023 mark the rise of the genuinely funny trailer?

Keighley's lot made a convincing argument that SGF could carve out its own niche alongside E3, which US industry body ESA had confirmed that same month would be returning for 2023.

That optimism is rather harder to sustain now. E3 2023 didn't actually happen, of course, its cancellation in March attributed to a lack of "sustained interest" from the industry, and as we write this, the ESA is having to deny reports it's already also called off E3 for the next two years. On the ground, the conversation isn't so much about the games on show, or the relative positions of the publishers and platform holders, as it is about these two events, and where they go next.

While that might suggest a poor crop of trailers and demos, this summer's is actually the healthiest we've seen in years. Not only in quantity – which, with the move to a broadcast model, and an increasing number being made, has actually ballooned – but also the presence of big hitters. Xbox is showing off nine forthcoming firstparty games, Nintendo has seven, and even Sony is managing four, plus a new piece of hardware. Yet these numbers tell a different story from how it actually feels in the moment. That disparity, setting aside all the caveats about remasters and known quantities, must surely be put down to the manner in which they arrive.

Sony's effort comes in late May, slipping out of the month which was just about the last thing these platform-holder showcases still had in common. It delivers a succession of trailers back-to-back in a way apparently committed to making it feel like as much of a non-event as possible, with SIE president Jim Ryan all but absent from the broadcast.

Nintendo brings up the rear, just as it did last year, with a Direct announced at the last possible moment. Its 40 minutes open with an extended look at *Pokémon* DLC, setting the pace for most of what follows: games that had already been shown at length in the prior weeks, a teeteringly large number of repackaged

old titles, and a selection of assorted barrel scrapings. (Two separate segments for *Splatoon 3*'s next Splatfest and European tournament dates, *really?*) Thank goodness for its mascot's recent successes on the big screen, which have apparently convinced Nintendo to finally crack open its rumoured vault of *Mario* games.

Again we find ourselves thinking less about the games themselves – many of which look promising, as we get into from p30 – and more the concept of E3, or whatever we should call it now, and how these platform holders feel about it. The rumours that Nintendo turning down E3 was taken as the final decider by many publishers only bolster the inevitable conclusion here: that they'd really rather not have the annual obligation. This is, of course, roughly the same conclusion we came to last June – and once again Microsoft is the exception that once more proves the rule. But we'll get there. To really appreciate how much the Xbox showcase felt like an oasis, you have to consider the drought that preceded it.

We step out of Inglewood's YouTube Theater and into the California sun, the

first natural light we've seen in two hours. It couldn't be much farther from our own internal weather. On the face of it, Summer Game Fest's opening showcase is exactly what we've been clamouring for: an actual live, in-person, on-stage event loaded with new games. And yet it leaves a dark cloud we only

manage to shake after catching up with the Day Of The Devs and Devolver pre-records that aren't shown on-site, presumably out of fear that they'd show up the 'main' event.

The vision of videogames' future presented by this showcase is alarmingly retrograde. While there's no pattern as overt as last year's science-fiction horror corridors, we can't help but detect a different kind of aesthetic homogeneity, one seemingly trapped in the mid-'00s. Games are either cartoon-bright or desaturated to within an inch of their life

and assembled out of some combination of guns, gore and gleaming medieval armour. Everything seems familiar, often because it's a series that was big decades ago, piggybacking off a licence from another medium, or simply an update to a game we could be playing right now instead of sitting here.

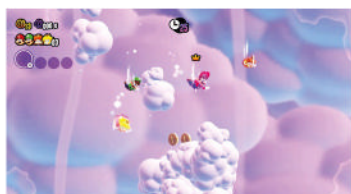
Play Days, the other half of Keighley's takeover masterplan, fares considerably better. The event has expanded significantly since last year's version, with a good mix of games in a venue suited to showing them off – one indie tells us how much easier it is to capture attention here than it was in some far-off corner of the LA Convention Center. A few hours bouncing between Day Of The Devs selections, bouts in big-budget multiplayer titles and a sprinkling of behind-closed-doors demos is enough to restore our faith in what we came here for, restocking our list of games to watch into the bargain.

A few blocks over, Ubisoft holds its own equivalent of this event, showing what were presumably the games it would have brought to E3, before deciding in March to cancel its booking in favour of this approach. The fact that its footprint is only a little smaller than the entirety of Play Days drives home how far the latter event is from being able to host the industry's major publishers in any meaningful sense. (EA and Activision are both present at Play Days, but with one relatively minor and imminent game apiece, *FPS Immortals Of Aveum* and team battler *Crash Team Rumble* respectively.)

It follows this with Ubisoft Forward, an attempt at a proper old-fashioned live press conference complete with dancers, a group of sea-shanty musicians to accompany a brief segment on *Skull & Bones*, and CEO Yves Guillemot getting the name of one of his games wrong. Bookending the week, Forward takes a similar tack to Keighley's opening gambit, and is likewise packed with familiar titles, but doesn't leave us downcast. The difference, we'd suggest, is one of motivation: the point of a traditional E3 press conference was not merely to glimpse a lot of new games in one place but to take the current temperature of its host. At their best, these presentations ►

As we write this, the ESA is having to deny reports it's already also called off E3 for the next two years

Attendance at Summer Game Fest's live show is noticeably thin – which does at least give hilarious prominence to the sole person cheering wildly every time 'Porsche' is mentioned



The climactic reveal of *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* beautifully pays off SGF's one moment of spontaneity, as host Keighley baits the audience with "Now, speaking of *Final Fantasy*..." before tamping down their cheers to explain that he's setting up a Doordash promotion



A summer of returns: *Phantom Liberty* sets up the *Cyberpunk* comeback story as *Super Mario Wonder* looks like a promising direction for Nintendo's 2D platforming, while *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*... well, looks like more *Marvel's Spider-Man*

BREATHTAKING
On the wisdom of booking celebrity cameos



Appearing during Summer Game Fest to promote *Dead By Daylight*, Nicolas Cage – who will be playing a survivor named Nicolas Cage in the game, a real test of acting skills – provides a much-needed jolt of star power. He doesn't have a huge amount to say, and the disconnect between his actual face and the enormous digital facsimile on the screen behind doesn't do much to flatter the game he's here to promote, but Cage knows how to hold an audience in the palm of his hands. There's value to that, as CD Projekt Red knows all too well – though this year it might have been better saving its money. With no one else in the room, Keanu Reeves' return to the Xbox showcase loses its punch.



In case there's any doubt that the media is being held at arm's length, the roundtable that follows Microsoft's showcase consists of staged questions. No emotional wobbles here, then

are effectively extended arguments, put forward by a publisher or platform holder, of what they value and why you should invest attention (and, eventually, money) in them. Which probably explains why Microsoft is motivated to put on the best show of the lot.

It has been a difficult period for Xbox, and for Phil Spencer in particular. As he steps onto the stage of the Novo Theater in downtown LA, just a few weeks have passed since his appearance on a podcast, part of the *Redfall* apology tour, in which he essentially admitted that Xbox has given up on competing with Sony and Nintendo. At an event that, for all its good points, is determined to weed out any trace of spontaneity – Spencer is here to introduce the pre-recorded broadcast we're about to watch along with the rest of the world, while the subsequent 'press conference' with Xbox executives proves to be equally rehearsed – this is the one moment when he deviates from the carefully managed script.

Spencer isn't really here to speak to the press but to loyal followers, Xbox's showcase having now been bolted onto the side of its Fan Fest event. He hasn't

prepared any words, he says, before addressing the rather enormous elephant in the room. "I let my emotions get the better of me," he tells his audience, whose members have nothing to offer but encouragement, recent events having apparently had no effect on Spencer's profile as an unyielding fan favourite. As he talks about how important this moment is, and the long months of preparation that have gone into it, his voice wavers ever so slightly.

He needn't have worried, of course. The ensuing one-hour showcase delivers for pretty much its entire duration, from the opening salvo of *Fable*, *South Of Midnight* and *Star Wars: Outlaws* and through the consistent introduction of games from Japanese developers. There are so many Sega games on show that for a while we wonder if it's all building to the announcement of another huge acquisition. (Indeed, documents later revealed by Microsoft's ongoing court battle with the FTC suggest this was at least considered in 2020.) In the event,

it turns out that these are all multiformat titles, but the message is crystal clear: Xbox is diligently patching up what has traditionally been its Achilles heel.

And all this, of course, is just the warmup act. Nodding to *Starfield* as the "one more thing" feels a little like cheating, given that it was billed in advance, but you can't argue with the claim that it's "the most comprehensive deep dive we've ever done, for the biggest game we've ever made". No kidding. Sitting in the auditorium for its duration feels a little like being a child who, after been caught smoking – or in this case, trying to sneak details about a forthcoming videogame – is forced to make it through the entire pack. And while it's hard to escape the feeling that this is the kind of thing that *press* should be producing, it's undeniably a smart feature-length extension of the Developer Direct format Xbox established in January – and we're in a forgiving mood.


Perhaps that's owing to our sense of relief at seeing Xbox briefly forget its recent pre-animal routine, rolling to show the regulators its belly, or that brief moment of humanity at the show's outset.

That quiver of emotion lingers because it's a reminder of why a publisher might be willing to put itself through all this effort in the first place. The opportunity to send a message to the world, yes, but also to provide development teams working in the dark for an ever-lengthening number of years with a focal point.

A chance to boost morale with the kind of immediate, human response you don't get from YouTube comments.

Which brings us back to why we left Summer Game Fest feeling so empty. Both models are ultimately extended advertisements, and it might seem odd to romanticise one over the other, but they're selling to different people. While for a publisher or platform holder the motivation is to reach potential customers, Keighley exists as a middleman. The people to whom he's selling, in the end, are the publishers who pay his bills. We're not the customer, we're the product. ■

Just a few weeks have passed since Spencer essentially admitted that Xbox has given up on competing

A person in a dark spacesuit stands on a rocky, uneven ground in the center of the frame. They are looking up at a massive, ringed planet that fills much of the upper sky. The planet has prominent rings in shades of pink, orange, and yellow. The scene is framed by two tall, dark, textured rock walls on either side, creating a canyon-like effect. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall mood is one of awe and exploration.

As the allure of Game Pass dims over time, *Starfield* feels like a much-needed light at the end of the tunnel. We'll watch those subscriber figures keenly



Vision quest

Apple finally reveals its XR hardware as Meta scrambles to hail the arrival of a revised Quest

Just as expected, Apple's entry into the world of extended reality (or XR, encapsulating both VR and AR) diverges from the path trodden by the likes of Meta and Valve. However, rather than presenting something that gets closer to the construction ideal of a pair of spectacles, the company's Vision Pro hardware, unveiled at its WWDC event in June, turns out to be almost as obtrusive as any other headset we've been invited to strap to our faces in recent years.

And it has to be: in order to deliver the kind of performance required to facilitate its unique feature set, the Vision Pro headset is loaded with more technology than has ever been crammed into such a device, with Apple's M2

silicon working in concert with its new R1 chip, which is designed specifically to process input from the hardware's sensors, mics and 12 individual cameras. It needs so many of the latter partly because of the system's control interface, which eliminates additional physical controllers in favour of parsing movements of your head, hands and eyes.

While eye-tracking isn't a new concept for XR – it's supported by PSVR2 and Meta Quest Pro, for instance – and controller-free gaming is an option with hardware such as Quest 2, the difference with Apple's solution is that these are cornerstones of the Vision Pro experience rather than options. The goal is to make operation as seamless as possible,

allowing it to become absorbed into your life with as few obstacles as possible. In navigating menus, for instance, there is no pointer projected into the display to show precisely where you're looking; instead, you simply gaze at the desired option and tap your fingers together to confirm the action. In carefully staged demos at WWDC, the system holds up well, delivering on one of Apple's unofficial marketing lines – 'It just works' – and it is clear that an immense amount of thought (and time, and millions of dollars) has been invested in a product aiming to deliver on the promise of 'spatial computing' when it launches.

The goal is to project images around your environment, giving multiple screens



As a wearable, the Pro Vision hardware shows the same attention to detail in its materials as the Apple Watch line. Alongside the fabric-based strap and the outward-facing display, one of its most unexpected quirks is the reliance on an external battery

to allow for, say, FaceTime-powered meetings in one area of the room while a screen running a presentation sits elsewhere, with still more components in support, creating a super-powered kind of digital environment intended to change how you work, communicate and consume certain types of entertainment. The imagery is generated in the standard VR-headset manner, with a display for each eye, but with passthrough to allow you to see your environment, fed into the screens by the high-end Vision Pro cameras. Ultimately,

It is a vision of augmented reality we've seen before, but in Apple's hands it feels a little more tangible

it is a vision of augmented reality that we've seen before, but in Apple's hands it feels a little more tangible than before.

Which doesn't mean that it's about to have the kind of effect on the XR market as previous Apple devices have famously had in other areas. For one thing, the minimum-spec model will retail for \$3,499 at launch, with availability initially restricted to the US market. Meanwhile, at no point to date has Apple positioned

Vision Pro with gaming functionality at the fore, with only a small concession towards it in marketing videos.

But games are in the pipe, with Apple's surfeit of development partners currently rushing to build them with a view of taking prominent positions on the platform at launch. We don't yet know how game pricing will pan out, but we hope it follows the XR market to date rather than blindly aping the deleterious free-to-play smartphone ecosystem.

Tadhg Kelly has been here before, having worked as senior partnerships manager at Magic Leap, where he collaborated with developers such as Funomena, Mozilla and Funktronic Labs to bring AR games and apps to the hardware that launched in 2018. Nowadays he works as a consultant specialising in XR, and he's well

PRO PLUS

With pricing starting at \$3,499 when it launches early next year, it's clear that Vision Pro is aimed at a narrow band of potential consumers – but that doesn't mean it will remain out of reach for everyone else as it evolves. "I think it's very interesting that the first version of this device comes with the 'Pro' label attached," Tadhg Kelly says. "It implies to me that there'll be a Vision, a Vision Mini, a Vision Ultra, a Vision Air and so on, so there will be cheaper versions in time." Apple hasn't stated sales goals for the initial iteration, but in its debut year it's likely to be in the hundreds of thousands rather than the millions. As for the price point it'll need to reach in order to achieve mass adoption? "I think the sweet spot for home adoption will be like higher-end consumer laptops," Kelly says. "So \$1,200–1,500 or thereabouts?"



Just like other Apple devices, Vision Pro can be synced with a DualSense for a more console-like experience. It will get its own versions of games such as *NBA 2K23*, viewable in jumbo-sized format within the headset

placed to have a view on Apple's approach. "It reminds me a lot of when Microsoft bet the farm on Kinect," he says of the decision to make Vision Pro a controller-free device. "Input is a massive problem in both VR and AR because it tends to be slow, imprecise, error-prone and tedious. It's not able to match the fluidity and precision of mouse, keyboard, touchscreen or stylus. I strongly suspect users will find it very limiting and expect Apple to add a native physical controller of some sort."

Patrick O'Lunaigh, CEO of nDreams (see E386), one of the most experienced developers working in XR, is more optimistic. "Particularly in a gaming context, it'll be fascinating to see how developers adapt to the controller-less input, and I'm sure it won't be long before they do," he says. "We were making VR games before controllers were commonplace, and we've also used hand tracking on Quest with *Little Cities*, allowing players to play with just hand and finger movements.

"Just like when the touchscreen was the newest way to play games – a development also largely driven by Apple, interestingly – the developers who really embrace the hardware and what it's good at will make the best experiences. [Developers] just trying to replicate what's worked on other platforms won't succeed so easily and may get left behind."

Despite its WWDC showing focusing on AR, the Vision Pro software lineup will doubtless also feature a range of VR

games, many ported from other devices. In foregrounding AR in its marketing, though, and by suggesting that Vision Pro is something you can wear for an entire work day, Apple is contradicting traditional norms for gaming from within a headset. "Unlike VR headsets, AR headsets don't cause nausea, even if the framerate and so on are janky, because the user can see the real world through them," Kelly notes. "That's why at Magic Leap I could be testing a build from a developer for hours and be comfortable doing so, and only really interrupted by battery issues or heat. So in theory, yes, Apple could be onto something [in terms of longer play sessions], as long as the Vision Pro's batteries are swappable and it doesn't get too warm. And, yes, that changes the boundaries of what works. I don't see Vision Pro being the place for exercise and shooter games, for example, but I do see it as the place for playing something like *Cities: Skylines* on a [physical] table."

"I think that we have already moved on a lot from the days of VR being all about short play sessions," O'Lunaigh says. "Not only is comfort improving all the time with the newer headsets, but there are really compelling VR games now with hours of gameplay that keep people coming back. A Newzoo report says that 60 per cent of VR gamers use their headsets at least once per week,



and we see people playing for longer and longer. But absolutely, Apple seems to be pushing towards longer, more frequent use with the Vision Pro. How games will fit into this is one of the most exciting things to observe, and I've no doubt they will play a big part."

O'Lunaigh's experience means that he's seen the best and the worst of XR hardware as it's evolved, and it's easy to see why he's keen to see Apple entering the mix. "For us – and for XR as a whole

– there can be no negatives to a company like Apple entering the space," he says. "If Apple is joining other massive companies like Meta, Sony and [Pico owner] ByteDance in embracing this technology, it only validates further what we've believed throughout our decade in VR."

"I think we have already moved on a lot from the days of VR being all about short play sessions"

Apple's entry into the market has certainly caught the attention of the XR industry's current leader, Meta, whose Quest 3 unveil was moved forward in order to land a few days ahead of WWDC. The company's next headset will launch in the autumn, with the base 128GB model retailing at \$499. Headline features include enhanced display resolution, improved controller haptics, and full-colour passthrough, cueing it up to push AR apps as much as traditional VR. Eye-tracking support, however, is notable by its absence.



XR industry specialist
Tadhg Kelly and
nDreams CEO
Patrick O'Lunaigh



From the outside looking in, the biggest changes for Meta Quest 3 are in its controllers – which follow last year's Quest Pro variants by eliminating previous iterations' encapsulating ring – and its three-unit camera/sensor array. The new headset is "40 per cent thinner" than its predecessor (see below left), and features a redesigned harness to make it more comfortable over prolonged sessions

"I think it's nice that the controllers no longer need the big hoop for tracking," Kelly says of Meta's hardware revisions, "but at the same time I keep feeling that Meta's stalled on really innovating on input, which I've been pretty critical of [previously]. I can't see anything in the new hardware that makes me think there's a generational leap, and I'm worried that Apple's approach to app distribution – with free-to-play, etc – will undermine Meta's premium software pricing.

"It also feels like Meta's direction with Quest keeps swinging back and forth – like the Pro headset, which launched last October and is now all but forgotten – and has become way more incremental than innovative, which is worrying."

Regardless, Meta staying the XR course can only raise the potential for both VR and AR. "I get the feeling that the good times may be coming back for AR development after a couple of difficult years," Kelly concludes. "Where it all ends up is anybody's guess, but it's nice to see a new energy in the space."

Given nDreams' commitment to its XR mission, it's no surprise that O'Luanaigh is even more enthusiastic. "I've been saying for a while that 2023 and 2024 would be milestone years for VR, and these announcements are definitely significant moments in proving this out," he says. "Combined with the successful launch of PSVR2, which is an amazing headset that's outselling its predecessor, it's easily the most exciting moment for XR gaming that we've experienced since we started in VR a decade ago." ■



"Quite a few AR games have been developed [in the past], but they're unknown because their host devices never got any traction," says Kelly, a veteran of Magic Leap. Some of the best examples will no doubt resurface for Vision Pro and Quest 3. Meta's mockups for its latest hardware (above) include the familiar sight of a game coming to life on a tabletop

BACK TO REALITY

What is the shape of modern AR game development?



"In my talk at GDC this year I argued that AR is roughly four years behind VR in its evolution – but I firmly believe [AR] will be huge," O'Luanaigh says in his assessment of where AR game development is right now. "An interesting point is that Meta haven't really shown their hand yet in terms of the MR [mixed reality] games and experiences that will be offered on Quest 3, but that's something I'd expect to see more of."

Helping the Vision Pro dev landscape is Apple's close collaboration with Unity. "Most [existing] AR games were developed in Unity, so you might see a surge of them re-emerging on Vision Pro soon after launch," Kelly says. "Beyond that, though, I doubt Vision Pro will be a commercially viable place for games for a while, but we might see a lot of concept projects from media companies, fashion, stuff like that."

BOWIE CONSTRUCTOR


Time to make tracks in mellow railway builder *Station To Station*

Despite the name, there are no thin white dukes in Galaxy Grove's relaxing puzzler. Nor do its locomotive operators drive like demons, preferring to chug gently along tracks you've placed to form supply lines between buildings that, in the game's most dramatic moments, thud into the landscape as if hurled down by an angry god. It's oddly akin to the arrival of a mech in *Titanfall*, though 'standby for dairy farm' doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

Linking these structures is straightforward at first: place a station adjacent to a wheat farm and another next to a

mill and then drag a track between the two and you've completed a connection. But soon the topography becomes a factor. Sending a track up a cliff requires you to shell out for an expensive bridge or else take the scenic route up a slope – though playing a card before your turn can reduce the expense. Your reward for fulfilling a building's needs is to see its surroundings transformed: colour and life floods in and you instinctively nudge your mouse wheel forward to better take in those glorious voxel views. *Station To Station* is out on PC later this year. ■





Shrewd use of shallow focus lends depth and solidity to these handsome voxel environments. You're never in any hurry, so why not take a few minutes to luxuriate in your surroundings?

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



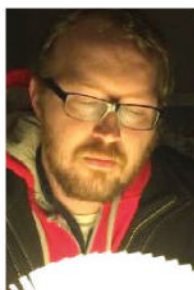
"Five years is too long to be working on one project, it's too long from a creative or conceptual standpoint, it's too long to move in step with the culture."

As Xbox Studios' Matt Booty emphasises how long it takes to make a triple-A game, Failbetter's **Bruno Dias** applies a pin to the balloon



"This isn't sustainable. Four to six years for an ever-increasing arms race of high fidelity is burning people out."

Add Outerloop's **Chandana Ekanayake** to the Againsts



"Diablo IV seals it – enemy scaling is... lazy, negates several play styles, ruins player power trips, and just sucks."

Who's up for joining Bungie's **Chad Jessup** on this hill?

"We've actually managed to create these social-media terrariums which manipulate people into being bad to each other, when it's not their instinct."

Look, says creator **Philip Rosedale**, if only we'd properly committed to his *Second Life*, maybe we wouldn't be in such a wretched place



CC (Chris McNeil)

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Air Zone Deluxe
Manufacturer Ace Amusements

The history of coin-operated gaming isn't overburdened with cabinets that fuse physical objects with action rendered on a screen – partly because it makes the design process significantly more complex, but also because it massively increases the likelihood of hardware failure. Why run a machine needing consistent maintenance rather than something that can be relied upon to just sit in the corner dutifully eating coins all day? *Baby Pac-Man*, whose miniature physical pinball section works in parallel with a traditional video monitor displaying its maze, represented a false dawn when it arrived way back in 1982, but look into the haunted eyes of anyone who's tried to keep the thing running and it becomes clear why it failed to blaze a trail. How refreshing, then, to see the emergence of *Air Zone Deluxe*, which presents you with essentially half of an air hockey table; knocking the puck in the time-honoured fashion sees it disappear into the aperture beneath a large screen on which the next stage of its journey is displayed. Twoplayer support and multi-puck action mixes things up, although we're not yet sure that it'll have the staying power of the traditional face-to-face version, nipped fingers and all.

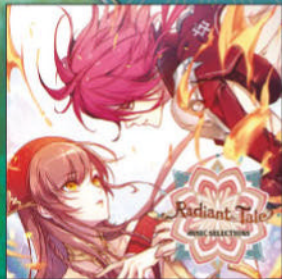


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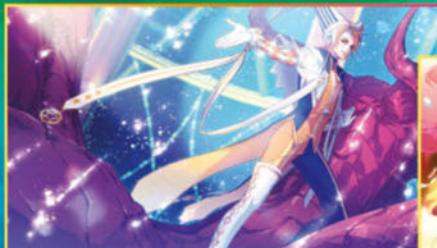
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BOOK

The Best Non-Violent Video Games

bit.ly/nvgotdbook
Gamesindustry.biz EIC James Batchelor (with the help of IGN senior reporter Rebekah Valentine) has been diligently spotlighting "games that [aren't] about killing things" via his Non-Violent Game Of The Day Twitter account, @NVGOTD, for more than a decade, and this book collates over 300 of the best. Having defined the rules – since what qualifies as 'violent' is largely subjective – Batchelor then offers straightforward and succinct outlines of each game. At £35 for 160 pages, it's not cheap, but this will surely prove a valuable resource for parents – or simply those keen to seek out games that pursue alternatives to combat. Beyond that, the pleasingly varied (and at times esoteric) picks provide a welcome rejoinder to those who claim games are nothing more than guns and gore.



MOD

MyHouse.wad

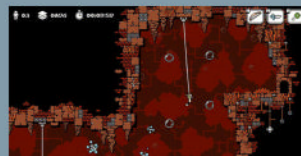
bit.ly/doomestic
Anyone familiar with House Of Leaves or The Backrooms will get a kick out of Steve Nelson's *Doom* mod. It begins straightforwardly enough, placing recognisable enemies in a simple domestic setting. But as you revisit rooms, you spot subtle changes to the decor and layout. Then you sense something not right about the audio score, while standing in certain places prompts unfamiliar noises – not a demon behind a door, but perhaps something in the walls. And then? Then it *really* goes places. Downloadable diary entries, sketches and photos lend extra texture to a deeply disquieting experience.

GAME

Undrium

bit.ly/fundrium

Richard Jordan's work has featured in these pages before, with isometric adventure *Melkior's Mansion* casting us back to the days of *Knight Lore* in E369. Jordan's latest pays dedicated homage to another Ultimate Play The Game title, released the same year: the less celebrated *Underwulde*. True to its inspiration, it's a purposely maddening platformer where mastery of your adventurer's unorthodox jump is key. They will leap automatically upon reaching the end of a ledge, but their trajectory depends on the positioning of the nearby level furniture, forcing you to decide whether you need to manually take off before reaching the end of a platform. Meanwhile, respawning monsters (kept at bay with a knife, dagger or torch) do their level best to knock you off your perch. It's aggravatingly moreish stuff.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things on our minds when we weren't doing everything else

BOOK

The Computer

bit.ly/computaschen

If thud factor is high on your priorities when choosing a book, German publisher Taschen might have just the thing. The Computer, a 472-page monster that measures 24.6x37.2cm and weighs in at nearly four kilos, is an extravagantly proportioned celebration of the devices that have defined so much technological progress since their invention as calculating machines all those years ago. Notable videogames get a look in as part of a net cast wide, encapsulating a galaxy of computer-related hardware and software, and hailing the contributions of pioneers including Ava Lovelace alongside more contemporary names such as Steve Jobs. Visuals take the lead in the editorial mix, incorporating hardware photography that makes you want to run your fingers across these machines, alongside archive materials that help provide context throughout. Some tasteful use of metallic ink rounds out a production that is as handsome as it is imposing. Just be sure that your shelves are up to the task.



continue

Hot rod

Ridiculous Fishing EX is resurrected on Apple Arcade, with a little Ko-Op assistance

Net gains

Storyteller gets a September release via Netflix, with bonus scenarios and characters

Cel-sabotage

Among Us follows *Cuphead* to become the latest indie hit with its own animated series

Code of Sylens

Guerrilla pays tribute to Lance Reddick with a memorial in *Horizon: Forbidden West* expansion *Burning Shores*

quit

Off Season

Scavengers Studio lays off all but 16 staff as *A Letter To The Future* underperforms

Imperfect Dark

Three years after its unveiling, The Initiative's reboot has hit "roadblock after roadblock"

That's bad

Toshihiro Nagoshi and other former RGG Studio staff removed from GOG credits

Spark limited

Yes Guillemot admits that ignoring Nintendo's advice caused *Mario+Rabbids* sequel to struggle for sales



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DISPATCHES

SEPTEMBER



Issue 386

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an exclusive **Edge** T-shirt



On the shoulders of giants

I was very interested in the idea posited in the Post Script for Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* remake in E383 – that games being remade to bring them up to 'modern standards' is actually another way for them to cash in on current trends. It makes a lot of sense – the writer brings up their own examples – but it got me thinking what remake could be said *not* to be doing this.

I landed, as I often do, on Bluepoint's *Shadow Of The Colossus* remakes. Throughout both their reiterations they've resisted making changes to the gameplay. The Forbidden Lands haven't been littered with map-revealing towers. No icons. No skill trees. They've even resisted urges from the cult fanbase to include the cut colossi, succumbing only to the wish to include one last mystery with the '79 Steps To Enlightenment'.

New players will face almost the exact same game as those of us did in 2006. The frustration of the player character's awkward movement, the horse's stubbornness, the colossi shaking you about just too much.

Even the most recent release (2018) still feels like a product of the initial release's era. *Shadow Of The Colossus* is often included in lists of the best games ever made. Measured in this metric, should it now be more widely considered as one of the best *remade* games of all time?

Joe Cuciniello

A useful rule of thumb is whether a remake feels like the original game as you remember it, not as it actually was. Job done, then.

Vampire weakened

The critical response to *Redfall* raises serious questions about whether the Game Pass model can sustainably support high-quality game development. I do think there's a case for affordable services as a retirement

home for old games – Nintendo's service makes a lot of sense. But Nintendo aside (oh, how often we say that), I'm pulling the plug on subscriptions. I'll do the hard work of researching what to play and buy outright. There will be some misfires, but hopefully I'll come to appreciate the slow-burners whose brilliance takes time to become clear. Today's subscription services make it all too easy to just hop onto the next thing. I've written to you on this topic before, but *Redfall* makes my position absolute. *Tears Of The Kingdom* is the first game I've preordered in a decade.

James Holloway

Prose and cons

Recently I came to realise that I've been an avid reader of your publication for the best part of 25 years, ever since the dijon-hued tones of E66. Now, as I sit here abroad, supping on my umpteenth tequila sunrise and catching up on my backlog, I've come to recognise the changes in my gaming habits as I've gotten older.

No longer am I rustling through coffee-stained issues in the college library; instead, I'm seamlessly gliding through virtual pages on a neatly arranged digital bookshelf. Once a pre-owned market magnate, I've transitioned into hoarding cloud-based backlogs across countless platforms. Steam Deck allows me to stream games with such immediacy that it pains my younger self, who had to endure Oprah on Channel 4 before being allowed to flick the Master System's RF switch on.

It appears that convenience has taken a stranglehold over my consumption in a way that I simultaneously appreciate and yearn for time gone by. I feel like some benefits have traded tangibility for benevolence in a manner that isn't always appreciated. Instead of buying a *Fallout 3* collectors lunchbox, I'm paying for the privilege of

"Today's subscription services make it all too easy to just hop onto the next thing"



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being a glorified beta tester. I remember when braving the elements outside a game store in the early hours and blowing cartridges were considered gateway rituals. Today they are replaced by dashboard countdown timers and relentless updates that no longer challenge physical exertion, only patience.

Unfortunately, I don't seek out obscure titles or mine them for every last nugget of content due to a lack of time. However, the one constant I've been able to rely on throughout is **Edge**. The Hype section tops up my extensive wishlists, and reviews broaden my gameplay palette. Thankfully, this allows me to reminisce about discovering a retro diamond in the rough!

Jamie Smith

Well, we certainly can't let such loyalty go unrewarded – even if the current **Edge** T-shirt is more 'carbon' than 'dijon'.

Deeper underground

It's been great to see more games embrace cryptic design, and now that *The Legend Of Zelda: Tears Of The Kingdom* has attempted this, too, I have to weigh in.

Zelda started out as a series attempting to make adventures like *The Tower Of Druaga* and *The Black Onyx* more accessible. With every iteration, more NPCs would tell you what to do, until *Breath Of The Wild* left the player loose, selling four times better than any of its predecessors. *TOTK* has literally doubled down on this concept by introducing The Depths: an underground area doubling the size of the game.

The flag bearer for contemporary cryptic design is the *Souls* series, and like many have commented, The Depths gives off similar vibes: dark, difficult and, most of all, mysterious. It also has a few ideas that are so brilliant yet so flawed.

First, why does this area have to be pointed out by any of the characters? It's almost entirely optional, but it would have been all the more intriguing if no quests or

maps told you to go to certain areas. I love it when games have features that make me wonder what the designers are trying to say with them (such as the flying dragons). I like to believe that many things in the past two *Zeldas* are aiming for this. Nintendo could have run wild with it here. Imagine going underground while the rest of the world simply doesn't acknowledge it. Perhaps the gloom is simply so horrid that characters are too afraid to speak about it?

Second, removing the darkness is too easy. You need to throw seeds to reveal areas, but they are abundant. You can also wear clothing and eat meals. Had the game demanded you offer a valuable resource – a sacrifice, if you will – then going through The Depths would have been a more exciting decision.

Third, you really shouldn't be able to save or teleport there. Like a rope leading back to the entrance, these tools guarantee you won't regret venturing forth. Difficult areas demand making a choice about whether or not you should go. The fun is trying to figure out if you're capable enough. This means paying attention to what the developers are trying to say. Which brings me back to the core concept of The Depths: it tries to be cryptic. But because you're so safe, you can casually decipher it one step at a time.

TOTK is still a 10 for having both an immense scale and considerable polish. Unfortunately, perhaps there was just a bit too much of the latter?

Robert August de Meijer

Yes, as previously mentioned, fast-travel feels like the easy way out. Though not everyone has found *TOTK* quite as accommodating...

Fears for Tears

Among the tidal wave of effusive praise for *Tears Of The Kingdom*, I appear to be alone in finding it punishes far more than it rewards. The tedious battle loop of having to replenish your health after every hit because otherwise the next hit will kill you is simply dull.

Tedious and dull: somewhat ironic in a game

lauded for its creativity. I discover that gaining more hearts makes no difference – and, in fact, results in extra punishment, since I need ever-stronger meals to replenish my health back to full.

The Internet tells me that I lack skill and/or imagination in my approach to play. However, I can find nowhere to practice and improve my skill as the two-hit death system kills me with such regularity that my only recourse is to avoid everything. In trying to be more imaginative, I build contraptions to reunite lazy Koroks, only to find that they inevitably go in the wrong direction and lead us directly to whatever enemy is guarding that particular gully (and shortly afterwards my next Game Over screen). So now I have to spend another few minutes reconstructing another contraption. I try to be clever and save the game before using a contraption, only to be punished on reloading when I find it has vanished and must be remade yet again.

I have loved the invention in shrines, where the variation in the puzzles is continually amazing. However, that is scant payback for the pain everywhere else. I consider myself to be a competent yet not expert player, which makes me curious as to who this game is pitched at. Clearly not me.

Jim Mackenzie

Watch your six

Love the magazine – I look forward to it arriving every month like an excited puppy who can read and loves videogames. However, each month, I stare at the exclusive **Edge** T-shirt that you give away to the author of the letter of the month and I cannot understand how the design of a number 6 in a square is related to **Edge**, or videogames, or both. Maybe it's totally obvious and I'm just a big dumbo, or maybe it's a really smart cryptic reference. Either way: please, please, *please* put me out of my misery. Thank you so much.

Lewis

Well, 6 is the secret Special Score, is it not? Sort of better than 7, in certain ways. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Like many useful terms – eg, ‘Big Bang’ – the phrase ‘walking simulator’ originated as a derogatory dismissal. (It was the British astronomer Fred Hoyle who, on the BBC in 1949, so described the theory, which he rejected, that the universe had begun in a massive explosion.) If we ignore the pre-history of its literal use (as in NASA’s low-gravity walking simulator for astronauts), the description ‘walking simulator’ arose in the late 2000s to describe a kind of art game that ‘hardcore’-identifying players found boring and pretentious. *The Graveyard* (2008), the haunting and influential microgame from Tale Of Tales in which the player guides an old woman shuffling through a graveyard to sit on a bench, was a paradigmatic early example.

With the help of more elaborate versions of the idea, such as The Chinese Room’s *Dear Esther* (2012) and Campo Santo’s *Firewatch* (2018), the walking simulator became something of an indie-darling genre, and a way of signalling that you, as a certain kind of player, did not need to shoot hundreds of people in the face in order to have fun.

This is as it should be, since ever since videogames have been able to offer a firstperson simulation of exploring a virtual space, they have been a way to let the player do what Walter Benjamin praised the then-newfangled technology of cinema for: in the walking simulator or movie theatre, we may “calmly and adventurously go travelling”. It follows that ‘walking simulator’ is also a good description of games where the primary mode of travel is not necessarily bipedal perambulation. *No Man’s Sky*, for instance, is a walking simulator where a spaceship does most of the walking, zooming calmly around the galaxy. And a large part of the pleasure we derive from more action-oriented games such as *Elden Ring* or *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is also based in the simple joy of walking, awestruck, around their magnificent environments.

But why are we there in the first place? And who was there before us? This is one intriguing strand of discussion in Melissa



Even in a walking simulator such as the classic *Journey*, Kagen intuites an undercurrent of some ancient violence

Kagen’s recent book, *Wandering Games* (MIT Press). “What happened to the people who used to be in this space before the wanderer wandered in?” Kagen asks. “What violence might (or must) have occurred to empty this space, so it just seems to be waiting for the player?” She observes: “It is a colonialist choice to depict ludic landscapes as mostly empty, descending from the era of 18th- and 19th-century landscape painting...” Even in a walking simulator such as the classic *Journey* (2012), Kagen intuites an undercurrent of some ancient violence that must have scoured this landscape eons before the player’s arrival.

This is, to be sure, a mode of academic analysis in which the subject is valorised to the extent that it can be argued to be countercultural and anticapitalist. (A walking simulator, Kagen suggests, is a bit like a protest march.) But the author’s treatment is enriching in that it both contextualises “pure” walking simulators as emerging from a longer artistic/political tradition that celebrated idle wandering, as in the cult of the flâneur in 19th-century Paris, and shows how more complex “triple-A” adventure games, too, are influenced by Romantic tradition. (For the latter point, she cleverly juxtaposes an early-Romantic German painting of a black-suited gentleman atop a craggy peak, gazing into the clouds, with the title screen of *Breath Of The Wild*, showing Link doing the same thing.)

When walking simulators portray the human future, by contrast, it is most often as the aftermath of some global catastrophe, which the player is nonetheless encouraged to read as a blissful escape from the contemporary world beyond the console. Both *The Last Of Us Part II* and *Death Stranding*, Kagen notes, read as “postapocalyptic pastorals”: they present “beautiful naturalistic environments that juxtapose wistfully against the ruined wreckage of human civilisation”.

Of course, in such traditionally structured games, an objective tells us where to go next, and yet on a deeper level we are creating the meaning of the world through our laborious traversal of it. “In the postdeath world these players inhabit, traversing the world is a pilgrimage, an attempt to knit broken space back together through the means of the feet,” Kagen suggests ingeniously. This, too, is arguably the psychic dynamic underlying the late Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. A walking simulator – whether novel, painting or videogame – simulates the most fundamental act whereby humans assert their agency and existence, their pilgrim’s progress. I was here, and you were too.

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include *Trigger Happy 2.0*, *Unspeaking*, and *Rethink*

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ADRIAN HON

Alternate Reality

Notes from videogaming's borders

Would *Skyrim* be better if it were ten times as long? Over the past few years, multiple modders have hooked Bethesda's game up to large language models such as ChatGPT so players can have longer and more interactive conversations with NPCs, with lip syncing and voice synthesis adding another layer of realism. Everyone who's seen these mods admits that the quality of the 'writing' and voices leave a lot to be desired. Even so, I've seen plenty of people salivating at the idea of generative AI soon creating infinite numbers of quests that could be played forever. This strikes me as utterly misguided, to put it mildly.

A good book doesn't get twice as good if you double the word count — just ask any Neal Stephenson fan — and it's hard to imagine how *Breaking Bad* or *Succession* could have the same impact if they were a thousand episodes long. True, *The Simpsons* is close to its 800th episode, but most would agree its best days are far behind it. Making more of a good thing sounds like a no-brainer, but the best human writers know better than to take an idea further than it can go.

The argument, of course, is that generative AI will eventually be better at writing than humans. It's hard to disprove that kind of evidence-free assertion, but it's worth taking a look at some of the most popular and successful generative AI storytelling experiment. Debuting in December 2022, *Nothing, Forever* is a GPT-3 powered parody of *Seinfeld* that streamed non-stop on Twitch until it was briefly suspended for breaking the platform's rules.

The show didn't attempt to look photoreal; its chunky pixelated 3D graphics, robotic voices, and canned laughter made its AI-driven origins perfectly clear. But its surreal dialogue had a genuine charm, and at times it reached over ten thousand live viewers, including myself. People in the chat would regularly claim that characters had reached sentence after delivering an improbably good line.



Who needs AI when you can hire a team of human writers to craft more quests than most people can complete in a day?

But when I dipped in recently, *Nothing, Forever* had fewer than a hundred live viewers. It hadn't got any worse — on the contrary, its graphics were more polished, more varied, and its dialogue was generated by a more advanced version of OpenAI's GPT. But the charm had worn off and people had moved on, confident they'd seen everything worth seeing, even on an infinitely long show about nothing.

The truth is, we don't need AI to make games that feel like they last forever. I recently tried *Honkai: Star Rail* to check whether I still didn't like JRPGs (sadly, yes).

While I was put off by its gacha-style monetisation, I was blown away by the quality and creativity of its writing. It has so many quests and sidequests and fun little activities, it's able to absorb a near-limitless amount of players' time, yet the developers don't need generative AI for their story, just a lot of really good writers funded by a lot of money made from gacha.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that *Honkai: Star Rail* is made in China. Not only does its science-fiction storyline betray some of the best and worst tropes of Chinese sci-fi, but the country is home to Web fiction on a scale that's almost impossible to believe. According to Megan Walsh's excellent book *The Subplot*, Chinese Web fiction writers can hammer out between 3,000 and 30,000 words per day in the hopes of attracting some of the 430 million active readers on the lookout for new online stories. Who needs generative AI when you can hire a crack team of human writers to craft more quests than most people can complete in a day?

Even outside China, it's well within the capabilities of *Skyrim*'s developers to add hundreds or even thousands more quests to the game, beyond the basic ones already procedurally generated by Bethesda's Radiant AI engine, and I'm sure enough players would be willing to pay for them to make it worthwhile. So why aren't there more? The simple fact is that the developers don't want to make them. They're busy making *Starfield* and a followup to *Skyrim* — games that will hopefully delight and surprise players with something they aren't expecting.

If you really want to spend hundreds more hours in *Skyrim*, human-generated mods are ready and waiting. No doubt AI-generated mods will join them soon. I'm sure some people will love them.

But the best videogames have endings. Limitless mediocrity is not what we should be hoping for.

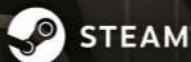
Adrian Hon is CEO of *Six To Start*, lead designer of *Zombies, Run!*, and author of the recently published *You've Been Played*



THE REPAIR HOUSE

Restoration Sim

COMING SOON!



The Repair House: Restoration Sim 2023, Quantum Logic Games. Published by Sold out Sales & Marketing, trading as Fireshine Games.

#387

THE HOT 100

THE BEST, BIGGEST AND OTHERWISE NOTABLE
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XBOX

Todd Howard says that only around ten per cent of *Starfield's* planets have life on them, though given the size of the game, that still adds up to a considerable number of worlds

EDGE



STARFIELD

Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** September 6

As much as Todd Howard wants to convince us that Bethesda has “never tried to make a game like this”, we’re not buying it. For all of its spacefaring ambitions, the 45-minute presentation bookending Xbox’s showcase makes one thing very clear: *Starfield* represents a greatest-hits record for the veteran open-world studio.

Not that Bethesda is limiting itself to borrowing from its own back catalogue. Using a scanner allows you to preview the resources and inhabitants of a planet in the manner of *Mass Effect 2*, while the influence of *No Man’s Sky* is felt in the procedurally generated environments you explore upon landing. Bethesda’s Creation Engine 2 continues to impress, offering detailed landscapes populated with alien lifeforms, yet we remain concerned about the variety of activities on offer. While Bethesda says we’ll encounter plenty of hand-crafted elements, auto-populating its world in a similar manner to *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a lot of these encounters seem to boil down to firefights in nondescript space stations. Combat has historically been one of the weaker aspects of the *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* games, and extended glimpses of gunplay suggest *Starfield* isn’t bucking the trend, thanks to stiff animations, simplistic enemy AI, and level indicators hinting at the presence of bullet-sponge opponents. Dogfighting promises more complexity, whether through hijacking spaceships, micromanaging ship systems in the manner of *FTL: Faster Than Light*, or through targeting specific sections of enemy vessels in a similar manner to *Fallout’s* VATS.

Perhaps it’s unfair to single out combat in this way. Bethesda games are best judged as sandboxes for player expression, and *Starfield* feels like the culmination of this design ethos. Its universe is stuffed with factions to align yourself with, as well as hub regions that beg to be explored: we’re intrigued by the neo-western Akila City, and the cyberpunk region, Neon. Customisation options are strikingly granular, whether for creating characters and outposts, modifying your weapons, or building spaceships in the shape of mecha.

We remain in the dark about the main storyline: your character starts out as a recruit for Argos Extractors, but it’s unclear how they get involved with Constellation, a mysterious (and vaguely colonial) group proclaimed as the “last true explorers in the galaxy”. We’re also unsure about the purpose of mysterious artefacts, although we suspect they tie in with the telekinetic abilities that have been teased. As with any open-world game, though, the true test of *Starfield* won’t be in the strength of its prescribed narrative, but in the path you carve out for yourself.



FORZA MOTORSPORT

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (Turn10 Studios) Format PC, Xbox Series Release October 10

With the *Horizon* series putting a more approachable, welcoming face on the sim racer, *Gran Turismo Sport* becoming a wonderfully earnest and idiosyncratic celebration of car culture, and the likes of *iRacing* and *Project CARS* burrowing deeper into their hardcore niche, where does that leave *Forza Motorsport*? This is a series that has effectively been usurped by its brighter, brasher offshoot – in the six years since *FM7*, we’ve seen two very different *Horizons*, after all. The answer lies in doubling down on everything it has always done well: this is effectively the videogame equivalent of a V8 engine and diamond piston set, with advances in machine learning powering the new dawn of an 18-year-old racing series.

“We’ve taken machine learning and applied it to build time and not run time or load time,” *Forza* general manager **Dan Greenawalt** tells us. “So not while it’s running or loading – actually, we’re able to do it before the game launches.” And what does that mean in practice? “Instead of having machine learning power the moment-to-moment decisions of the Drivatar, we’re having it train the Drivatar to control the car, and then we’re using an optimiser to make the lines that Drivatar follows.”

What that has allowed Turn 10 to do, he continues, is to “train massive amounts of data so

that we can take every car, with every upgrade and all the tuning options through the wet, through the dry, and train that controller so that the AI can make the car do everything it wants it to do.” We may never get fully used to Greenawalt’s favourite portmanteau, but suffice it to say that we can expect opponents to offer better races than ever.

What’s more immediately clear from our perspective is that *Forza Motorsport* has never

“If you turn all of the audio cues on, you could literally put a blindfold on and drive around the track”

looked this good. The reboot marks the series’ first step up to the latest generation of console hardware, and while racing games have historically raised the bar for graphical fidelity, Turn 10’s tinkering has given it a visual sheen that positively sparkles. Under the hood, meanwhile, sits a suite of accessibility options – features the *Forza* series has been building upon

for years. Braking, throttle and turning assist options return, with extra care being given to audio assist features this time.

“If you turn all of [the audio-assist cues] on, you could literally put a blindfold on and drive around the track,” creative director **Chris Esaki** says. “Whether you are near-sighted, whether you’re blind, fast or slow, you can have a great time with this game.” A sim racer for everyone, then? At the very least, this feels like the more sophisticated yin to *Horizon*’s raucous yang.



SOUTH OF MIDNIGHT

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (Compulsion Games) **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Between the vaudeville trappings of puzzler *Contrast* and the '60s psychedelia of survival Roguelike *We Happy Few*, Compulsion Games can certainly deliver a distinctive aesthetic. So it's no great surprise that some of the most memorable imagery of the Xbox showcase should come from the Montreal studio. Via an angular, stop-motion visual style redolent of animation house Laika, it introduces us to demonic blues guitarist Shakin' Bones, perched on a pier in a Mississippi bayou. His crooning is interrupted by the game's protagonist Hazel, who asks for help locating a creature that is, as trailer convention dictates, about to rise up from the swamp behind

her. Handsome stuff, though with no introduction beyond the basso-profundo "world premiere", it's only after a visit to its Steam page that we learn this is a thirdperson action adventure in which Hazel uses "mythical weaving powers" to take on her fantastical quarry. Five years after the studio's acquisition, it's a reminder of how long contemporary games take to make – and given the issues surrounding *We Happy Few* (whose early *BioShock*-style teasers set expectations it was never designed to meet), the lack of playable action is a risky tactic. Here's hoping it's third time lucky for Compulsion, and that it finally releases a game that's as good to play as it is to look at.



CLOCKWORK REVOLUTION

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (InXile Entertainment) **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Showtunes playing from speakers. A steampunk city with an art nouveau aesthetic. Heavily armed automata controlled by a dictator set on bending the world to their will. The team at InXile aren't so much borrowing from *BioShock Infinite* as stripping it for parts, resulting in a firstperson action game which resembles Columbia with the serial numbers filed off. This extends to combat, which takes cues from immersive sims: one power allows our protagonist to electrify a set of spinning blades, for example, while another grants them the ability to manipulate time. And although its narrative shifts its focus from American frontierism to British colonialism, it's not enough to quieten our sense of déjà vu. We remain cautiously optimistic, however, that the *Wasteland* studio will take a more nuanced approach in its depiction of revolution.



33 IMMORTALS

Developer Thunder Lotus Games **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

Sometimes you need a good cry to get it out of your system – and so, having pulled every trick in the book to make us all weep over 2020's mawkish *Spiritfarer*, Montreal's Thunder Lotus Games is returning to its action roots with this co-op Roguelike. It's closest in feel to the developer's 2015's top-down adventure *Jotun*, except this time you're accompanied on the road from hell to heaven (via a pit stop at purgatory) by up to 32 other warriors. You'll need to work together to survive, not just splitting the toil of tackling enemy hordes, but to pull off co-operative moves, whether launching volleys of light arrows or healing other players. Since the difficulty doesn't scale down to accommodate the reduced numbers, you'll need to revive them quickly; whether you'll be able to easily spot downed allies amid these teeming battles remains to be seen.



FABLE

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (Playground Games) **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

We recognise the inimitable tones of Richard Ayoade several seconds before his (impressive if slightly uncanny) digital likeness appears. Playground Games is presumably confident that plenty of viewers will, opening its trailer on a black screen before introducing us to Ayoade's Dave, a 'vegetable enthusiast' addressing the camera as if taking part in a mockumentary. This is both an inspired piece of casting and the perfect choice for reintroducing a

game after two years of silence: a beloved British comic actor whose presence is entirely in keeping with previous entries immediately suggests the series' new custodians have understood the brief. If nothing else, it all but proves that – at least in terms of tone – *Fable* is in safe hands.

What follows, essentially an irreverent riff on a classic fairytale, seems largely to bear that out. This feels for the most part like a *Fable* greatest-hits compilation – albeit one sprinkled with a liberal helping of



An oversized Richard Ayoade reassures us that the developers know what makes *Fable* work, but we'd really like a closer look at the game in a player's hands

triple-A visual fairy dust. Sword fights with bandits. Drinking games. Sarcastic comments from villagers. Balverines. Chicken kicking. Heck, the appearance of oversized pumpkins has us recalling our visit to Lionhead for **E277**'s cover story on the ill-fated *Fable Legends*. Oh, and a bit of good old-fashioned swearing, with an f-bomb (uttered by the hero upon seeing that Dave is, in fact, a giant) cut short by the closing titles, and what principal game designer Grant Orban later claims is the first use of the word 'wanker' in an Xbox Showcase trailer.

In many respects, then, the trailer does what it is supposed to. And yet questions remain. VP of games marketing Aaron Greenberg may have proclaimed that "none of our firstparty games in the show are full CG trailers", but *Fable*'s might as well be. This 'in-game footage' tell us

little about how the parts we actually play will look, beyond a couple of snippets showing a traditional thirdperson perspective – the camera appearing to hew a little closer to the player-character than in *Fables* past – which are suspiciously brief, perhaps to avoid closer scrutiny.

It's worth noting, too, that two prominent faces at Playground Games – co-founder Gavin Raeburn and *Forza Horizon* creative director Mike Brown – recently departed to form new studios, taking a number of staff with them. That perhaps explains why, in a showcase where Microsoft is happy to pin 2024 dates on plenty of its forthcoming releases, it chooses to demur here. In other words, we shouldn't expect *Fable* to arrive any sooner than 2025 – although if the game itself can live up to its cinematics, the wait should be worth it.



DUNGEONS OF HINTERBERG

Developer Microbird Games **Publisher** Curve Games **Format** PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

The cel-shaded pop-art aesthetic of Microbird Games' debut was always likely to turn heads, but its self-referential approach to dungeon-crawling and social-simulation elements might ultimately be a bigger draw. It's set in a former skiing resort in the Alps, which attracts tourists and adventurers from across the world, when a series of magical dungeons appears out of nowhere. You fill the shoes of one such adventurer, Luisa, spending much of your time flitting between a ski lodge and these labyrinths, each brimming with twisted monsters.

Luisa navigates her surroundings on foot, swinging on ziplines, grinding railings, and solving environmental puzzles to

reach new areas and scavenge treasures. Combat fits the fast-firing realtime ARPG template, with players able to use the world around them to get the drop on enemy groups from above, or sneak up on them from behind. After a hard day's work, it's back to the lodge for a pint, a coffee or a slice of cake.

It makes for an irresistible loop: wake up, explore a dungeon, and then hang out with other characters. With no romance options planned, the push-and-pull of building relationships lends *Dungeons Of Hinterberg* an old-school point-and-click adventure feel, where every chat might unearth narrative threads and items that might help out in the wild.



AVOWED

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios (Obsidian Entertainment)
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

Might *Ghostwire: Tokyo* turn out to be one of the most unexpectedly influential games of its generation? It appears to have inspired the recent wave of elaborate spellcasting animations in titles such as *Immortals Of Aveum* and this, a firstperson sword-and-sorcery roleplayer. It's perhaps the most noteworthy element in a game that resembles nothing so much as a new-gen take on *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, with the gamma and saturation levels bumped up in post-production. Sent to an island called The Living Lands to investigate a plague – one that causes fungi to sprout on zombies and bears alike – your envoy will amass an arsenal of weapons (from flintlock pistols to frost axes) and curses (binding roots, swirling vortices) that will have residents wondering whether you're here to save or destroy them. Familiar stuff, in other words.



THE LAMPLIGHTERS LEAGUE

Developer Harebrained Schemes **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** October 3

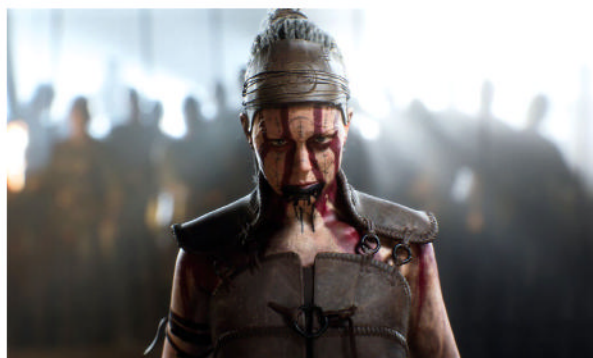
With The Bearded Ladies dropping the ball somewhat with *Miasma Chronicles*, there's an opening for Harebrained Schemes to fill the void with this pulpy combination of realtime infiltration and turn-based tactics. Set in an alternate 1930s, it sends the eponymous organisation on a globe-trotting mission to prevent a cult from taking over the world – but with all but one of the league's finest agents dead, the last remaining founding member is forced to recruit the 'best of the worst'. Since you're playing a band of misfits, it's only fitting that the developer has its cast playing against (stereo)type – lantern-jawed war hero turned robber Eddie has the physique of a boxer but is actually a saboteur, while femme fatale Ingrid is the initial trio's muscle. With new recruits adding occult powers to the mix, it should have the depth to match its style.



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2024

Developer Asobo Studio **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

Even with an opening caption announcing “the next generation of *Microsoft Flight Simulator*”, it takes a little while for the penny to drop: this isn’t an expansion, but a standalone sequel. We bristle – until we realise it’s somehow been four years since Asobo’s successful reboot and that it’s not too soon for a followup. Not least given what’s on offer here: encouraging you to “pursue your dream of a career in aviation”, it presents a huge variety of options, from helicopter mountain rescue and cargo-transport operations to crop-dusting missions. There are scientific research quests that ask you to fly close to climatological phenomena, VIP charter flights, and hot-air balloon tours besides. It’s a clever way to encourage you to try out a variety of flying vehicles, giving you time to adapt to their handling and work your way towards mastery.



SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

Developer Ninja Theory **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

After the more action-led approach of *Hellblade II*'s previous teaser, here is a reminder not to expect Microsoft's equivalent to Sony's *God Of War*. (You could argue that this is more like Xbox's *Horizon*, given Senua has an even chattier inner monologue than Aloy.) But since we're already aware of her psychosis, it is an odd choice to highlight it in a cinematic that otherwise gives almost nothing away – it would be unwise to read too much into the utterances of those purposely contradictory voiceovers. The trailer is a formidable flex of technological muscle, with Ninja Theory's cutting-edge performance capture replicating every twitch of Melina Juergens' expressive face. But Xbox Game Studios once again passes up the opportunity to show us how one of its flagship titles will *play*. Still, there's time between now and release for that.



JUSANT

Developer Don't Nod **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Release** Autumn

VR and climbing have proved natural bedfellows, but it's taken a while for flat games to catch up. Encouraged, perhaps, by *Breath Of The Wild*'s vertical exploration, and maybe even *Death Stranding*'s idea of landscape as adversary, Don't Nod's latest suggests a more involving alternative to the traditional blockbuster approach. No more pushing up on the analogue stick and tapping a button to move between clearly marked handholds; here, your stick inputs must be accompanied by squeezes of the left and right triggers to cling on.

As you ascend a mountain littered with shipwrecks (the title is a French term referring to low tide), the visual clues to

guide you are subtler, the stylised art ensuring that thick chalk lines aren't needed. There's often more than one way to reach your intended destination, and sometimes you'll need to make nerve-jangling leaps, holding the jump button to bend your knees before releasing to spring for the nearest grip point. Your rope becomes invaluable when it's time to swing across to distant ledges, while pitons become player-determined checkpoints, letting you pause when you need to manage your stamina. Meanwhile, the tension and physicality of the climb is counterbalanced by a calming atmosphere. *Jusant*'s waters may be at low ebb, but our enthusiasm for this is not.

PLAYSTATION



FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Developer/publisher Square Enix (Creative Business Unit 1) Format PS5 Release Early 2024

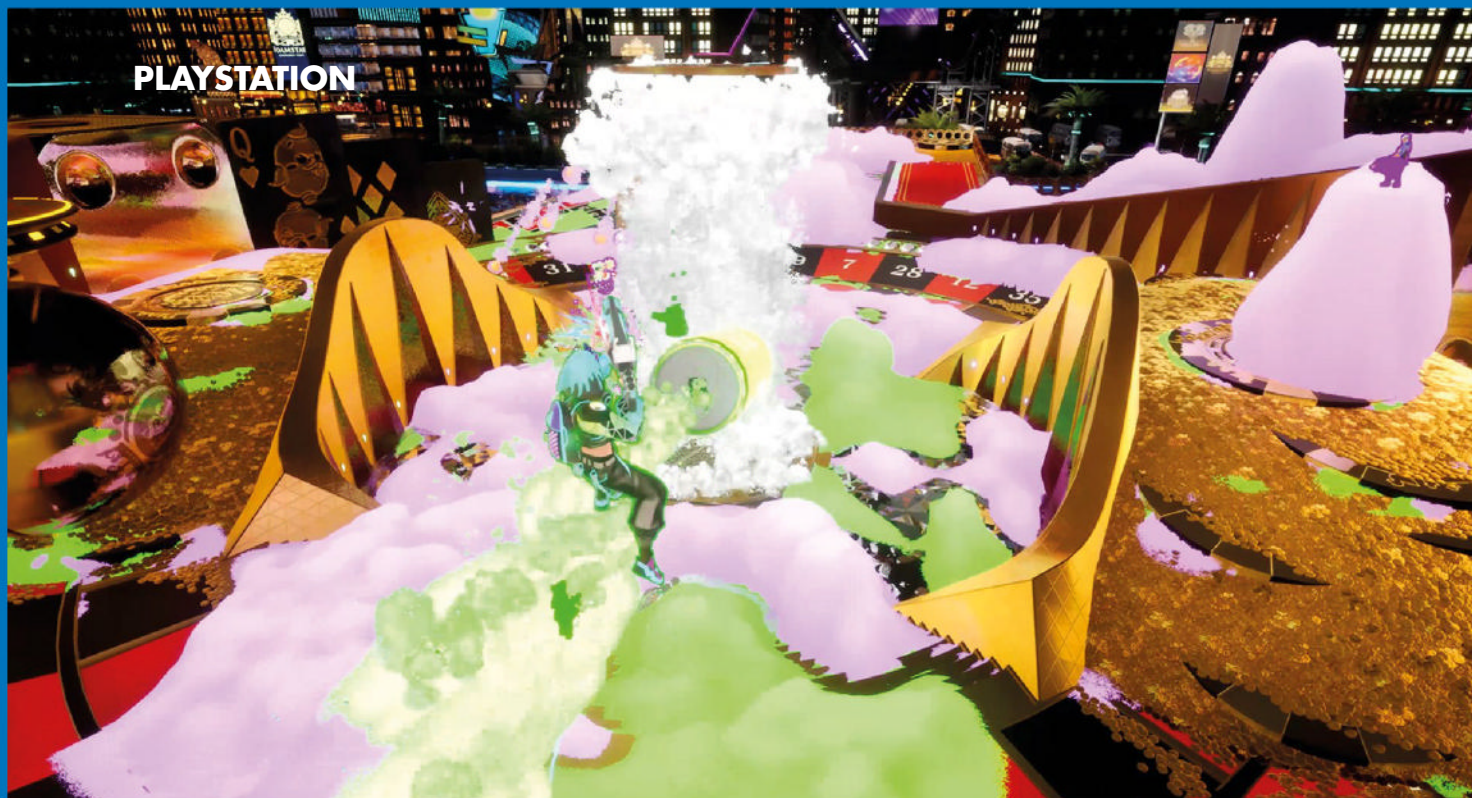
Even with remakes as firm fixtures on the release calendar, it seems overly self-conscious for a developer to have its game's title state as much. So when Square Enix did exactly that with *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, the first chapter in a three-part retelling of this classic RPG, it should have been a clue that this wasn't going to be a scene-for-scene refurbishment. With second instalment *Rebirth* being framed as an "unknown journey", the gloves seem well and truly off.

Still, it would be unwise to alienate an audience that is still mostly showing up to experience one of videogames' most beloved stories with a current-gen glow-up. So despite an initial curveball with news coverage of a natural disaster befalling a previously unseen sector in Midgar, *Rebirth's* focus is on leaving behind that dystopian metropolis and venturing into the wider world that, at least on the surface, hasn't been completely polluted by megacorporation Shinra's activities.



It makes a refreshing change to have Cloud and the party wandering through lush forests and flowery meadows rather than the rocky caverns and metallic corridors that made up much of Midgar's environments, though we suspect these routes will only offer the illusion of openness. Given *Remake* was set in one location, stretching the original's first five hours to feature length, you might assume this picks up the pace to tick off all the stops that need to be made, from the village of Kalm to the observatory in Cosmo Canyon, with chocobo available to speed up your journey. Yet a glimpse of the boggling scale of Junon's military base suggests Square Enix won't be cutting corners; likewise the fact that *Rebirth* is set to come on two discs, surely an incentive for PS5 owners to upgrade their SSDs.

Less certain is where in the story this part will conclude – or even if it ends up somewhere completely different – but perhaps that matters less than the time spent with the game's cast, with talking wolf Red XIII and ninja thief Yuffie joining the party proper after their brief appearances in the first instalment. The latest mainline entry may boast more mechanically intricate realtime combat, but it's hard to deny how much more appealing it is to control different party members in battle, with pair-ups that make for spectacular finishers. Whether they will also be joined by the unusual Cait Sith or originally optional recruit Vincent Valentine is less certain, never mind what the game intends to do with a certain character previously thought dead. With *Rebirth* no longer strictly a remake by name and definition, anything seems possible.



FOAMSTARS

Developer/publisher Square Enix Format PS4, PS5 Release TBA

Who knew trading paint for foam could make such a difference? When it first appeared in Sony's showcase, Square Enix's family-friendly arena shooter looked like (to put it generously) an attempt to expand *Splatoon* into a genre that could exist outside Nintendo's console ecosystem. So it's a surprise to get our hands on *Foamstars* and discover that the bubbly substance fired by its arsenal isn't a one-for-one substitution. This foam has a three-dimensional presence that isn't possible with spatters of emulsion – in fact, it might be more helpful to imagine a version of *Prey's* Gloo Gun that spews out candy floss rather than gobbets of loft insulation.

As a result, there's a thrilling dynamism to the way each team's shooting reconfigures the shape of the battlefield on a match-by-match basis. Before our demo match, a publisher rep briefs us on the strategic possibilities of careful foam deployment, although once battle commences we can't help but think of a real-life foam party – specifically, the gap between what's promised on the flyer and the disappointing reality.

Indeed, the associated probability of infection aside, *Foamstars* replicates that experience all too faithfully: the messy flailing, the sterility of the venue, the stuff getting in your eyes so it's hard to see what you're supposed to be doing. The arena

we sample, beneath its K-pop ornamentation, is flat and featureless, with little to block sightlines or funnel advances and retreats (intended, presumably, to leave room for the cover you're spraying).

Unlike in *Splatoon*, there's no opening phase where you lay down your colour in relative peace. You're thrown into the fray almost immediately, and once the foam starts flying it becomes difficult to tell what's going on. Friends disappear into the pastel mist; enemy projectiles come from seemingly nowhere, and when they connect, there's no tangible sense of impact. Readability is of utmost importance to this genre, especially when action moves this fast.

Elsewhere, though, *Foamstars'* divergences from *Splatoon* show promise. Foam accretes on players until they look like cotton-wool sheep made in a child's crafting lesson, capable only of rolling to safety. They must be finished off by a rival player surfing across the foam to tackle them; if an ally does the same, they'll be revived. We play *Smash The Star*, a mode which after a certain number of spawns names one player on your team the VIP: let them fall and the match is lost. There is tactical depth here, even if the advice shouted by the rep-turned-team-coach seems to amount to 'play better!' We'll need more hands-on time in order to see if all this globby mass adds up to genuine substance.

Imagine a version
of *Prey's* Gloo Gun
that spews out
candy floss rather
than gobbets of
loft insulation



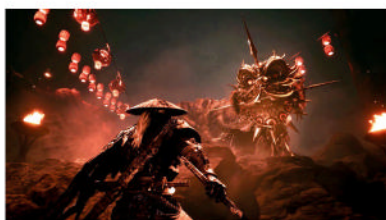
TOWERS OF AGHASBA

Developer/publisher Dreamlit Inc **Format** PC, PS5 **Release** 2024

An opening caption noting that “all aspects of the game are subject to improvement and change before the final release” feels like a humblebrag given what follows. Featuring huge and startlingly well-realised beasts – their designs having something of the quality of *Xenoblade Chronicles X*’s dinosaur menagerie – at times Dreamlit’s game appears like a cross between *Breath Of The Wild* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, with one sequence seeing the player gliding between Brobdingnagian sky creatures resembling manta rays.

You won’t, however, be attacking their weak points; you’re there to pick parasitic organisms off their backs. As the game’s

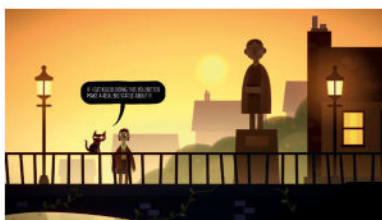
primary verbs (‘explore, build, grow, connect’) make clear, your task is to restore this ancestral land, not to colonise it. Though you’ll build settlements – visually inspired, the developer says, by Nausicaä Of The Valley Of The Wind – there’s a stronger connection with nature, as you plant seeds that grow and attract new species to the land. There’s a bit of *Viva Piñata* in here, then, and perhaps a little *Horizon* as you battle hostile visitors with bow and arrow. With cooperative multiplayer, too, it’s not lacking in ambition. Whether its many elements will knit together neatly, though, is another matter. Can it amount to more than the sum of its influences?



PHANTOM BLADE ZERO

Developer/publisher S-Game
Format PC, PS5 **Release** TBA

Taken at face value, this might be the most exciting game to feature at Sony’s pre-summer showcase. S-Game’s action RPG looks like a thrilling hybrid of Team Ninja and FromSoftware’s work, combining agile traversal with breakneck-paced fights: a tussle with enemy riders on a horse-drawn carriage is exhilarating to behold. But we’ve seen a few debuts like this in recent years: games such as *Black Myth: Wukong* and *DokeV* that make splashy showcase appearances and then vanish, leaving only scant details of how they play. *Phantom Blade* does have some history, however, with a string of mobile games released in China. Indeed, S-Game co-founder Soulframe Liang has suggested that the combat will draw from that smartphone simplicity, which makes us wonder how many of these acrobatic moves are automated.



REVENANT HILL

Developer The Glory Society **Publisher** Finji
Format PC, PS4, PS5 **Release** TBA

As if to prove it isn’t only triple-A developers that like to make trailers that give nothing away, the announcement of the debut game from The Glory Society offers just under 60 seconds of a cat scampering across a side-scrolling 2D world while ignoring a host of human characters – as cats are wont to do. This feline protagonist looks a little familiar: some wondered if it was *Night In The Woods*’ Mae Borowski, before artist Scott Benson (working again alongside Bethany Hockenberry, who wrote and designed the 2017 indie darling) admitted via Twitter that “this is just how I draw a cat”. The team provided more details: set in 1919, it casts you as Twigs, an itinerant tom who puts down roots in a community populated by anthropomorphic animals, as well as witches, for whom he dreams of becoming a familiar.



HELLDIVERS 2

Developer Arrowhead Game Studios **Publisher** SIE
Format PC, PS5 **Release** 2023

We can’t think of many antecedents: the sequel path from top-down tactical twin-stick shooter to over-the-shoulder thirdperson action is not a well-trodden one. After eight years in development, Arrowhead’s ambitious followup is almost with us, and unsurprisingly the response has been mixed. Where the original often discouraged direct combat with its alien hordes, this seems to lean more into the idea of blasting your way out of trouble. Perhaps that’s because stealth would make for a less exciting teaser, but then its support abilities – from an explosive airstrike to an electric trap capable of zapping multiple bugs – appear to tend toward the destructive. That could be a by-product of the decision to present the action in the style of a Starship Troopers-style recruitment video; we would indeed like to know more.

PLAYSTATION



While you're able to play as both Spider-Men, that doesn't mean a friend will be able to step in and take control of one for you – this remains a singleplayer game



MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Developer/publisher SIE (Insomniac Games) Format PS5 Release October 20

No fewer than *four* superhuman characters might have been squeezed into Sony's 12-minute preview – not to mention enough explosions to make Michael Bay blush – but the real star of Insomniac's *Spider-Man 2* demo is easy to miss: the humble wingsuit. Using web shooters to slingshot himself from a rooftop, Miles Morales deploys the gadget as he glides, weaving between skyscrapers and picking up speed along windstreams, towards a fish market where oversized antagonist Lizard is wreaking havoc. Before we know it, he's arrived: over a kilometre travelled in less than 20 seconds, all while strategising over comms with sidekick Ganke. A prolonged showdown follows, culminating in an extravagant chase featuring drone-powered water skiing, but nothing gets us quite as excited as the sight of Spider-Man swinging through New York City.

Having created one of videogames' most purely enjoyable traversal systems in the 2018 *Spider-Man*, it makes sense that Insomniac would double down on this mechanic rather than rebuild it from scratch, an approach that has also been taken for this sequel's combat. Peter Parker still weaves around the battlefield in a similar (if nimbler) fashion to Batman in the *Arkham* games, dodging onslaughts foretold by attack indicators, but he has acquired a fresh suite of abilities powered by his symbiote suit. We witness him bursting out of a garage while being held aloft by a mass of black tentacles, shapeshifting into a literal wrecking ball before using his suit's tendrils to bodyslam four enemies at once. It's an uncharacteristically violent strategy for this friendly neighbourhood superhero, whose apparent corruption allows voice actor Yuri Lowenthal to cut loose with some impressively guttural screams.

Still, if you want quieter company, Insomniac's sequel will allow you to swap between Parker and Miles Morales at certain moments. And Parker isn't the only character who has received a glow-up: the new web-line gadget allows Morales to create rope bridges and scuttle across levels like an arachnoid trapeze artist, while a revamped mine fires webs that can immobilise multiple enemies at once.

It's a shame the familiar narrative beats on offer feel less thrilling, as big-game hunter Kraven hits New York – especially when the groundbreaking *Across The Spider-Verse* is so fresh in our minds. All the same, it's comforting to be back in the company of such likeable characters. Insomniac's light-hearted approach to storytelling remains a breath of fresh air in the big-budget console space – particularly when we have wingsuit-assisted web slinging to look forward to.

SUPER MARIO BROS WONDER

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) Format Switch Release October 20

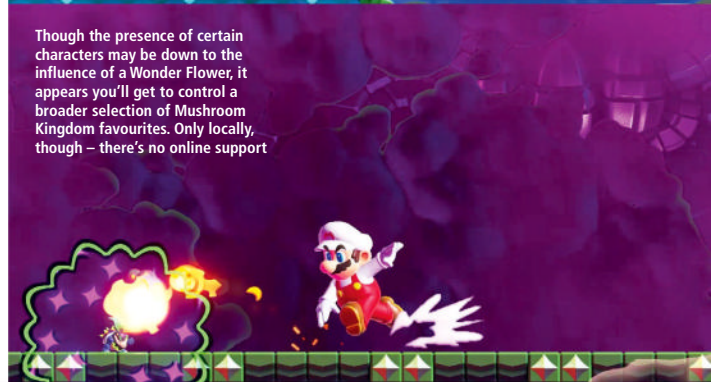
Nintendo's fondness for remakes or remasters of older games, or sustaining more current ones via DLC – an approach that has rarely been so evident as during this summer's Direct – means it doesn't feel like it's been six years since the last mainline *Mario* game. Or, for that matter, 11 since its sidescrolling predecessor. With Ubisoft's Yves Guillemot lamenting the sales performance of *Mario+Rabbids: Sparks Of Hope*, citing Nintendo's advice not to release two similar games on the same hardware, you can understand why it waited. Though Guillemot's suggestion of being told to hang on for new hardware raises a question: given Switch's successor appears to be just around the corner, is it not unusual for a new *Mario* game to be released so close to the end of a console's lifespan? Switch's vast installed base is the counter to that. And on present form, there's every chance we'll see a *Super Mario Bros Wonder DX* in a few years' time.

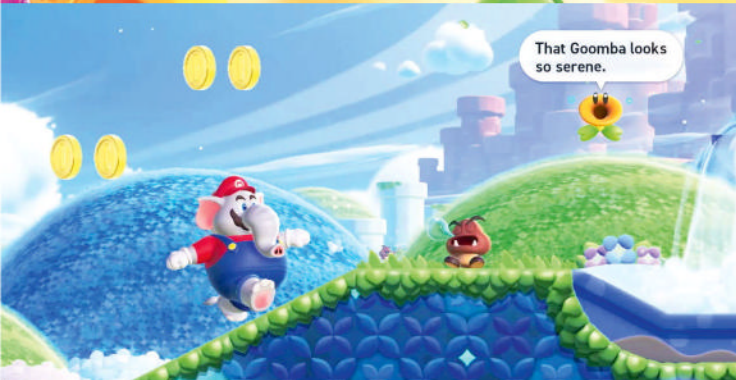
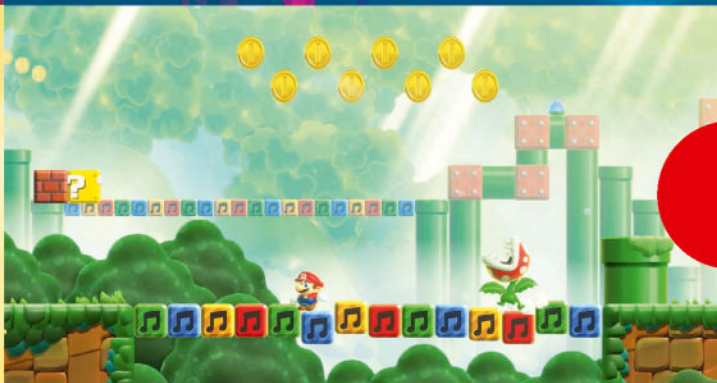
For now, we're fascinated by what looks like an attempt to bring some of the madcap invention of Mario's 3D adventures into his 2D outings. Its introduction immediately after a new *WarioWare* seems instructive, too: there is something of that same giddy unpredictability here, triggered whenever Mario collects a new Wonder Flower. Though perhaps the desire to shake things up ultimately stems from *Super Mario Maker*. Between the Weird Mushroom, the Amiibo characters and the ability to change an object's design by, well, shaking it up – not to mention players' inventive combinations of familiar level furniture – that remix spirit is in abundance here. We have horizontal pipes that bend in the middle; pink Koopa Troopas on rollerskates; Reznors ploughing through the goal pole; Mario transforming into a spiked ball (destroying blocks to the sound of bowling pins being skittled) and a stretchy silhouette. Yoshiaki Koizumi also highlights the presence of Daisy: apparently as significant a surprise as a new power-up that turns Mario into an elephant, capable of tossing Goombas aside with his trunk.

There is, then, more character and texture than in the fine but comparatively bland *NSMB* games, with more expressive animations among the cast – exertion, surprise and fear clearly visible on their faces. Early footage does, however, raise a few concerns, not least the (already irritating) talking flowers, and level design that – perhaps to accommodate the game's trippier tricks – looks a little rudimentary, with a focus on forward momentum that recalls *Super Mario Run*. Still, almost three decades since *Touch Fuzzy Get Dizzy*, it's time Nintendo embraced the Mushroom Kingdom's psychedelic side once more.



Though the presence of certain characters may be down to the influence of a Wonder Flower, it appears you'll get to control a broader selection of Mushroom Kingdom favourites. Only locally, though – there's no online support





SWITCH



SUPER MARIO RPG

Developer TBA Publisher Nintendo Format Switch Release November 17

Here was an announcement seemingly designed to keep two sets of noisy fans quiet – though we imagine there will be a fair amount of crossover between both groups. For as long as we can remember, there has been a clamour for the Pinocchio-like Geno (a wooden warrior with a celestial secret) to be added as a playable character to the *Smash Bros* games, while those who've been demanding a Switch port of GameCube favourite *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* should at least be temporarily sated by the arrival of the game that gave Mario his RPG debut. More significantly, this is the first time *Super Mario RPG* will be physically available in Europe – 1996's *Legend Of The Seven Stars* (the subtitle appears to have been ditched entirely this time) was only ever released in the US and Japan, with PAL territories having to wait until the game's 2008 launch on Wii's Virtual Console.

On this evidence, it's a surprisingly faithful update, despite an opening sequence designed to highlight the substantial visual upgrade – at least for the cutscenes. Setting aside that slightly antiseptic contemporary *Mario* sheen, the playable moments (both during the exploration stage and the turn-based battles which first introduced the timing-based elements that have become a signature feature of every *Mario RPG* since) retain the

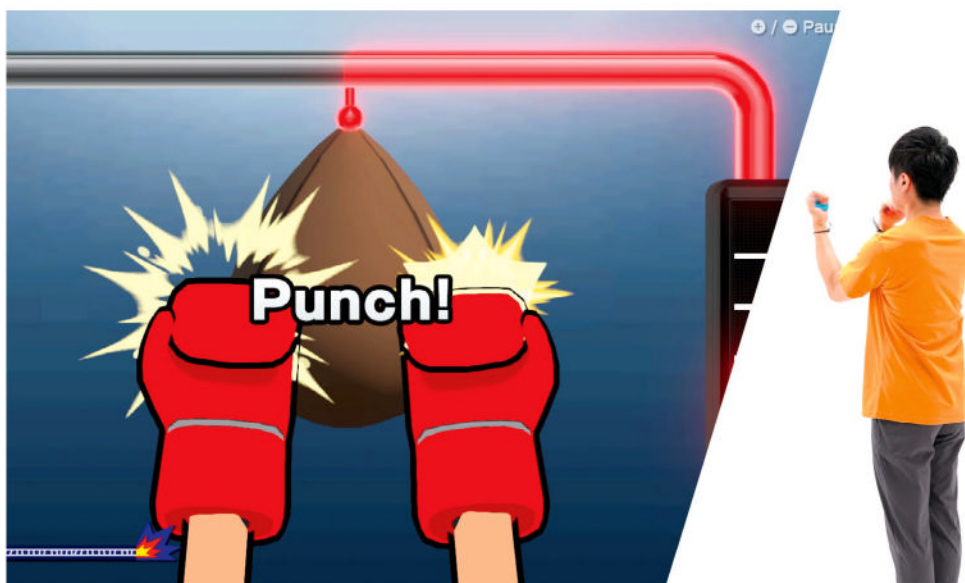
diagonally oriented overhead camera of the original game and its character proportions, with Mario appearing shorter and squatter here than he's been in any other game lately. But beyond the more dynamic character introductions and cinematics, this seems closer to a remaster than a remake – with scant evidence of any substantive changes beyond a handful of cosmetic adjustments of the kind most players would need a wiki to identify.

Beyond the more dynamic character introductions, this seems closer to a remaster than a remake

On the audio side, at least, it has received a more significant overhaul, with Yoko Shimomura returning to fashion luxurious orchestral rearrangements of her own tunes.

Many players will be delighted to see the spirit of the 1996 original preserved intact, of course. Yet at the same time it's hard to quell our lingering concerns that Nintendo has been increasingly using nostalgia as

a crutch of late – that this was deemed one of this Direct's most pleasant surprises says much about the direction in which the company has been headed in recent years. True, this may be a superior schedule filler in what appears to be Switch's twilight days. But while Nintendo has a rich and storied history to draw from for the foreseeable future, should it continue to reach back into its past it will eventually find it has fewer games on the shelf worth dusting off and polishing whenever there are gaps to be plugged.



WARIOWARE: MOVE IT

Developer Intelligent Systems **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** November 3

Perhaps the true worth of a *WarioWare* game is measured by how ridiculous it sounds: the more absurd, the better. So we're thrilled to discover that in *Move It* you will be asked to hold both Joy-Con controllers above your head, shaking your arms and hips to disguise your scuba diver as a piece of wriggling kelp to avoid the attentions of a hungry shark. You will writhe again to wriggle free from a knotted rope. You will hold your arms out and tilt left and right to steer Mario down The Princess's Secret Slide from *Super Mario 64*. And you will towel dirt off the shell on your back by, well, doing what comes naturally in such a scenario.

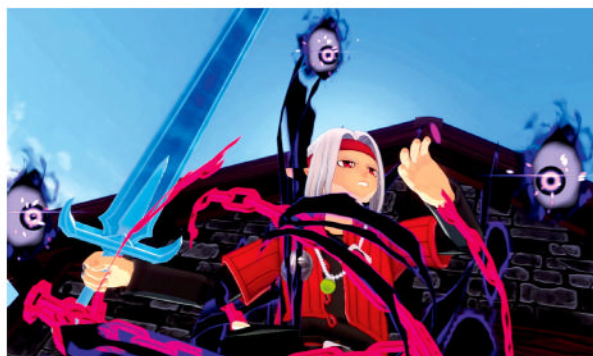
It's *Smooth Moves 2*, essentially – hopefully without the pre-microgame prompts that prevented it from achieving the Pavlovian magnificence of the series at its breathless best. Visually, it has the Post-It-sketch energy of its predecessors. And, assuming you've got another set of Joy-Con tucked away, there are cooperative activities besides, in which you're encouraged to "sync up your actions": pitching and whacking profiteroles as baseball players, or wafting the loose wool off a rotating sheep standing on its hind legs. A safe sequel on paper, sure, but as long as it retains its core silliness, *WarioWare* will never feel like the timid, conservative option.



DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS

Developer Creatures, Inc **Publisher** Nintendo, The Pokémon Company
Format Switch **Release** October 6

Five years since the 3DS original and four since perhaps the unlikely live-action film adaptation of a videogame (more unusually still, it remains comfortably one of the better examples of the form), the electric mouse investigator is back, in a sequel we sense Nintendo has probably been sitting on for a little while. There's certainly the whiff of 'break glass in case of emergency' about the timing of it: otherwise we might have expected an earlier followup to a story which failed to resolve two of its key mysteries (both settled in the movie). Once again, the coffee-loving mascot joins forces with human pal Tim to solve riddles in Ryome City, this time with a clutch of new Pokémon. This time, we're told, we should get an answer to the origins of the great detective; we can only assume *this* particular reveal doesn't involve Ryan Reynolds.



DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

Developer Tose **Publisher** Square Enix
Format Switch **Release** December 1

It might be one of Japan's biggest RPG series, but *Dragon Quest* spin-offs don't always make the journey overseas. We've had *Heroes*, *Builders* and *Treasures* in recent years, but no *Monsters* – at least, not since 2011's *Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2*. A year on from *Treasures* – itself an offshoot from the *Monsters* series – it's making a surprise return with an entry that appears to be a prequel of sorts to *Dragon Quest IV: Chapters Of The Chosen*. Certainly, it features both the hero and the villain of that game, though in a twist you play as a younger version of antagonist Psaro. Otherwise it's true to tradition: you're a wrangler, not a fighter, and must scout and breed monsters to battle on your behalf. With over 500 creatures to recruit or synthesise, this could prove a decent alternative to the two *Pokémon* expansions this winter.



BEASTIEBALL

Developer Wishes Unlimited Publisher Klei Publishing Format PC Release Late 2024

Earlier this year, Ash Ketchum finally retired from his quarter-century campaign to become a Pokémon master. Greg Lobanov and friends surely couldn't have known this was coming when they began work on their followup to 2020's exquisite *Chicory: A Colorful Tale* – yet nonetheless, *Beastieball* opens by asking what might happen if his story had played out in realtime. Here, local hero Redd, anime hair squashed under the peak of a baseball cap and unruly stubble sprouting from his chin, is cast in the classic sports-movie role of the champ whose best days are behind him. It's easy to imagine this guy watching videos of old battles from his sofa, a too-early-in-the-day beer warming in his hand.

Luckily, though, it's not Redd whose story you pick up here, instead assembling your own character out of cartoon body parts. They're a rookie coach who grew up in the shadow of their idol and eventually beyond it, picking up the mantle to represent the imperilled Rutile Town in the *Beastieball* big leagues. Flawed mentors and underdogs thrust into the spotlight in their stead are themes that run through Lobanov's work – *Chicory* begins in similar fashion, and we can only assume that the story will stretch as far beyond 'cute monster catcher' as that game did beyond 'cute dog with paintbrush'.

In fact, while the inspiration of Nintendo's series is evident, *Beastieball* has almost as much in common with Supergiant's *Pyre* and Ustwo's *Desta: The Memories Between* (which coincidentally sat in the exact same spot on the Play Days showfloor last year). It's a narrative-led turn-based sports title, with matches of its fictional ballgame playing out on two-by-two grids on each side. When your team of two has the ball, they have three actions to

spend on repositioning, passing and spiking the ball in their opponents' direction. In all honesty, we don't quite manage to grasp the full nuances of this system before running out of demo, but the fact that it's being built for online competitive play hints at unseen tactical depths.

For now, though, it's what happens outside of matches that has us most intrigued. Your team of Beasties can dynamically develop relationships as they play, whether that means falling in love or becoming sworn enemies, which will play against a narrative backdrop that, if the opening is anything to go by, will toy with themes of how humans treat the natural world and killing your idols as a natural part of growing up. With almost the entire *Chicory* team reassembling under the banner of Wishes Unlimited, including game-soundtrack rockstar Lena Raine, and Klei signed on as publisher, it's looking like – how else to put it? – a dream team.

The fact that the game is being built for online competitive play hints at unseen tactical depths



HENRY HALFHEAD

Developer Lululu Entertainment **Publisher** Popagenda **Format** PC **Release** TBD

As Henry Halfhead wakes one morning from uneasy dreams, he finds himself transformed into his bed. And, before long, into the alarm clock, crashing to the floor to halt its ringing. Then the toaster, the kettle, the teabag, and so on and on.

Along with *Tchia* and another game you'll find in these pages, *Henry Halfhead* is part of a new wave of games belatedly delivering on the promise of 2017, putting possession mechanics – as seen in that year's *Prey* reboot, and *Super Mario Odyssey* – front and centre. Henry is essentially Cappy rendered in flesh. Shaking off that disturbing visual, though, we come to appreciate his ability to take control of any item.

Sometimes this just means the item sprouting eyes and rolling clumsily around, but the most delightful are those that come with some bespoke mechanic. Books crack their spines to read out their contents. Knives pounce, slicing through any soft objects they touch – such as an apple, which, once cut, yields a seed that can be hopped into an empty plant pot to grow a fresh sapling. It's easy to imagine the puzzles that might be made possible by this ability but just messing around with it is a pleasure, even without sampling the promised splitscreen co-op. Perfect for a story that, its developer tells us, is all about rediscovering the joy of play in everyday life.



ÉTÉ

Developer/publisher Impossible
Format PC **Release** TBA

Set in Montreal, its creators' home, *Été* couldn't be much more stereotypically Québécois if it tried. You play an artist who rides a bicycle between a selection of picture-postcard landmarks to paint them in watercolours, chatting to folk along the way in subtitled French. None of which is a negative, we should add. Its *Unfinished Swan*-meets-*PowerWash Simulator* approach to filling in an initially blank world is satisfying, especially as you finish colouring in an object and are rewarded with a cloud of droplets in matching hues, which charges up the painterly equivalent of a shmup's screen-clearing bomb. Best of all, each completed object is added to a collection for making your own paintings – not flat stamps, but 3D objects that can be rotated. As if we didn't lose enough hours to the 2D scrapbook in *Season* (another Montreal production, naturally).



EN GARDE!

Developer/publisher Fireplace Games
Format PC **Release** August

There's no finer type of surprise than a game that comes out of nowhere, commits to its appealing conceit, delivers on that potential in its early moments, and turns out to be launching within a month or so. So it goes with Fireplace Games' delightful swashbuckler, a bright and breezy thirdperson action adventure in which you play the resourceful Adalia de Volador, putting smug swordsmen in their place. They're not exactly chivalrous, attacking in groups, so even with a robust automatic lock-on, you'll need to use your environment against them in moments that evoke the slapstick energy of a more family-friendly *Yakuza*. Well, why parry when you can punt opponents off piers or shove them into weapon racks? And with *Astrologaster* scribe Katharine Neil involved, its wordplay should match the quality of its swordplay.

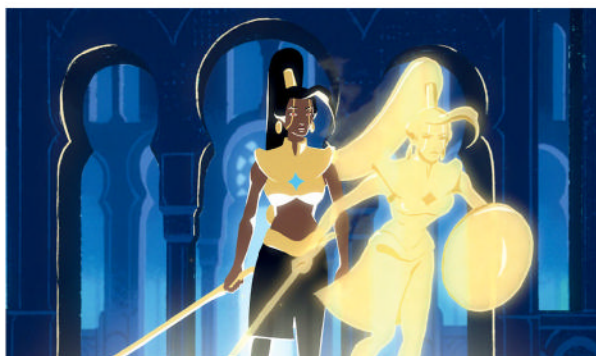


ISLANDS OF INSIGHT

Developer Lunarch Studios **Publisher** Behaviour Interactive Inc **Format** PC **Release** TBA

As a publisher, Behaviour Interactive has ended up a long way from the game for which it is best known. If *Dead By Daylight* is the dark corner at the back of a video shop, *Islands Of Insight* has the air of a vaguely new-agey garden centre. Players with glowing fairy wings on their back swoop between floating islands decorated with a grab-bag of classical architecture: pyramids, pagodas, Parthenons and the like. It's *Second Life* meets *Myst* meets a mid-'00s tech demo, with a dash of *The Witness* and *The Talos Principle* for good measure. Puzzles spawn constantly across the islands, integrated into the environment or simply tacked onto a wall – while the former

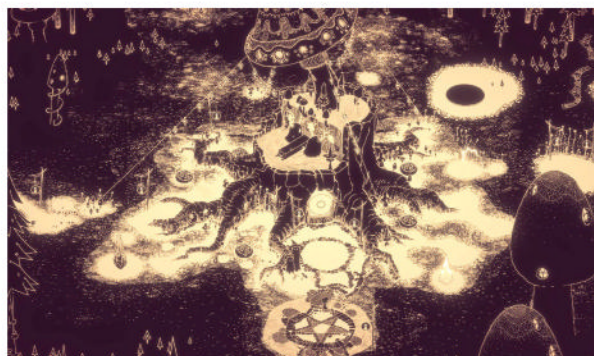
tend to be perspective-based, requiring you to find the right spot to stand so that clues line up, the latter vary from sliding-block puzzles to code-cracking and pattern-matching ones. Those that are demonstrated to us (admittedly, by someone who must already know the solutions) seem to be of a similar scale and complexity to one of *Zelda's* Korok seeds, more a brief diversion than a real head-scratcher. It's unclear whether each puzzle is handcrafted or procedurally generated, even after we put that question directly to our tour guide, and this surely will be the making – or undoing – of *Islands Of Insight*. After all, we need *something* to offset those slightly naff vibes.



LYSFANGA: THE TIME SHIFT WARRIOR

Developer Sand Door Studio **Publisher** Quantic Dream
Format PC **Release** 2023

Hasn't everyone wished, at some point, that they could split themselves into two? That you had a few clones who could help out with, say, writing 40-some pages of Summer Game Fest editorial? *Lysfanga* suggests this might be something of a monkey's paw. As heroine Imë, you battle demons in 30-second bursts, before rewinding to the start of the encounter to fight alongside your previous self. It's as much a puzzle game as a hack-and-slash, then, encouraging you to take time to study the battlefield before the swords start swinging. It might be the busy showfloor environment, but in action we find it difficult to keep track of which monsters are already dead along the timeline, even before the game folds in more explicitly puzzling elements such as twinned enemies that must be taken down simultaneously. But we're ready to rewind and try again.



HAUNTI

Developer Moonloop Games **Publisher** Firestoke
Format PC **Release** TBA

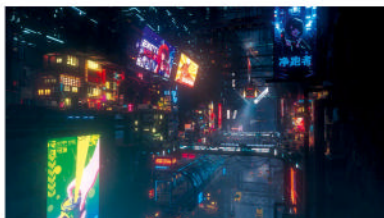
It's been a while since we've had the opportunity to name a new genre. Should we call them possess-'em-ups, or Odysseylikes? Thirdperson haunters? Whatever the case, the contrast between *Henry Halfhead* and this twin-stick shooter should help set the boundaries, since in most respects they couldn't be more different. *Hauntii's* world is monochrome, with line work that recalls Edward Gorey's illustrations, and also sprawling, loaded with mini-challenges (clear the enemies, race the ghost, collect the moons) that put the *Mario* comparison to the forefront of our mind, even as the presentation of its world has us thinking of *Bastion*, *Hollow Knight* and the work of Playdead. What it shares with its genre mate – and all of the above games – is that love of playful surprise. If it can keep delivering for the duration, we could be in for something special here.



FROSTPUNK 2

Developer/publisher 11 Bit Studios
Format PC **Release** 2024

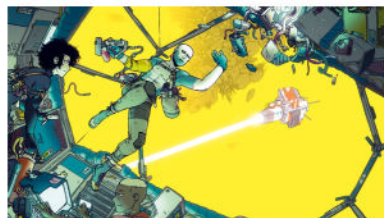
Managing a city during an apocalyptic Ice Age is one thing. Rebuilding an entire society? Well, that's quite another. 11 Bit Studios is looking 30 years into the future for this followup to its acclaimed mashup of the survival and city-builder genres. Here, the rebirth of the oil industry presents the last city on Earth with the means to expand once again, while simultaneously stoking the embers of rebellion.



NIVALIS

Developer Ion Lands **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC **Release** 2024

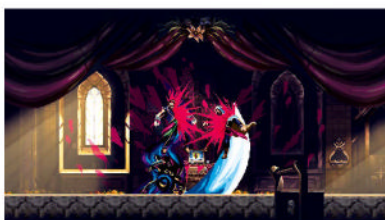
Cloudpunk's familiar yet seductive *Blade Runner* mood wasn't matched by the pedestrian game contained within its voxel cityscape. Happily, its successor looks likely to deliver on the original's promise, offering you the chance to build up your business from noodle stand to nightclub owner. And you'll have plenty of downtime to socialise, go fishing, and take in those sumptuous views.



CITIZEN SLEEPER 2

Developer Jump Over The Age **Publisher** Fellow Traveller
Format PC **Release** TBD

Now here's something worth waking up for. This unexpected sequel comes hot on the heels of the original's final DLC chapter, but it seems Gareth Damian Martin has already been hard at work on its story and systems. Expect to be placed in the body of a new Sleeper, once again on the run – but this time with a ship of their own to take from port to port, picking up jobs and friends en route.



MARIACHI LEGENDS

Developer Halberd Studios **Publisher** Freedom Games
Format PC **Release** TBA

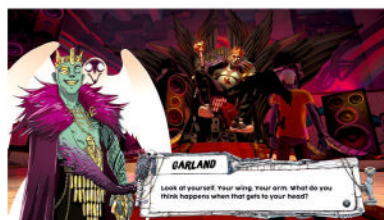
Not the first Mexican Metroidvania, nor the first to feature a masked protagonist sent to the land of the dead. Instead of a luchador, though, you're cast as an ace detective, transformed into a swordsman by Death herself, with a supernatural mariachi suit granting you special powers. And the Japanese voiceover is an unusual choice by the developer to distinguish its game from *Guacamelee*.



SIMPLER TIMES

Developer Stoneskip **Publisher** iam8bit
Format PC **Release** TBA

As the wave of 'cosy' games becomes a deluge, here is the apogee of hygge: an almost militantly *pleasant* firstperson "interactive meditation" in which you play a young woman interacting with objects in her childhood bedroom. You'll listen to songs (on vinyl), take photos (with a Polaroid) and stargaze to the clacking of a Newton's cradle. Be warned: the Steam blurb may test your gag reflex.



HELSKATE

Developer/publisher Phantom Coast
Format PC **Release** TBA

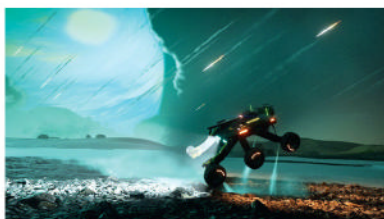
You can hardly accuse Phantom Coast of lacking ambition. Its distinctive debut combines elements from the spectacle-fighter genre with fast-paced, combo-focused skateboarding – a particularly appealing fusion given game director Steve Swink's experience working on the *Tony Hawk* series. It's all wrapped up in a Roguelike structure reminiscent of *Hades*, complete with visual novel interludes.



FEROCIOUS

Developer Omyog **Publisher** TinyBuild
Format PC **Release** TBA

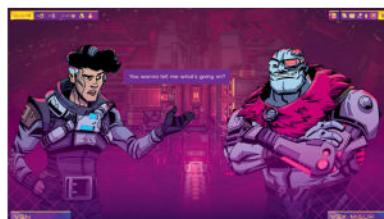
A technically accomplished FPS from Germany in which you battle prehistoric enemies in leafy jungles? Not for nothing have we decided to refer to this as *Dino Crysis*. Developer Omyog cites the flexibility of the Unity engine for the convincing vegetation and water effects, with photogrammetry accounting for the realistic quality of most assets – though not the dinosaurs, we have to assume.



EXO RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Developer Exbleative **Publisher** Future Friends Games
Format PC **Release** 2024

You can't get more off-road than the tarmac-free surfaces of these alien planets, where you're as likely to be carried off by a tornado as knacker your drivetrain by colliding with a rock. Then again, with careful use of your thrusters, your tyres won't always be in contact with (extra-)terra firma – letting you bypass *some* hazards on the perilous, procedurally generated courses of this followup to *Exo One*.



DREAD PILOTS

Developer/publisher Klei Entertainment
Format PC **Release** 2024

Klei is renowned as an innovator; when it's not subtly reinventing a genre, it's finding ways to embellish existing ideas. So we have to assume the finished *Dread Pilots* will do more than the debut trailer to distinguish itself from Failbetter's *Sunless Skies*: beyond its conventional comic-book science-fiction trappings (relative to the latter's gothic Victoriana, at least), the two look *alarmingly* similar.

MULTIFORMAT

Idris Elba plays FIA agent Solomon Reed. Unlike Keanu Reeves' Johnny Silverhand, he's not all in your head: you work with him to recover the President from Dogtown



CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

Developer/publisher CD Projekt (CD Projekt Red) Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Release September 26

Since *Cyberpunk's* launch, the polished press demos of E3s past have become infamous for their smoke and mirrors. But a lot has changed since then. We sit down for 90 minutes with the game's expansion, and with quest director **Paweł Sasko**, a man who has the air of having read every review. If there are any remaining doubts that CD Projekt has learned its lesson, they dissipate when, halfway through that time, Sasko says the magic words. "I have a proposition: let's just fuck around with some systems."

No sticking to the scripted path here, then. We're encouraged to create our own chaos, summoning a vehicle (using the new, streamlined system) and using its chassis-mounted machine guns (new) to see how Dogtown's (new) wanted system and *Phantom Liberty's* (new, improved) AI works. Throughout our demo, Sasko provides a commentary on what has been added, or expanded, or ripped out like malfunctioning cyberware and replaced. In short: *everything*.

The most immediately impactful of these changes are to character builds. The original skill trees have been felled, with new ones erected in their place – "the driving aim," Sasko tells us, is to replace intangible percentage increases with skills that actually *feel* different. We sample some of these as a prebaked fast Solo, using our katana to deflect bullets back to sender before closing in with the new double jump and air-dash to run our upgraded mantis blades through a few bodies. That katana can be used in vehicle combat too: riding a motorcycle with a sword slung by your side is a perfect cyberpunk visual.

Many of these additions will be available even for players who don't buy *Phantom Liberty* – the expansion will be accompanied by the biggest of the mea-culpa updates CDPR has been doing since the base game's launch. What they won't have access to is Dogtown, the slum district of Night City, which comes complete with new types of side mission (look out for red smoke), or the Idris Elba-starring story, which poses the question: are you a bad enough dude to rescue the President?

Although in truth, POTNUS Rosalind Myer is a bad dude herself. As two strangers enter our apartment, we waver over dialogue choices and she shoots them both dead – for the rest of the demo, Sasko points to moments when the pair would have appeared and helped us. Guilt trip aside, it's a marker of how CD Projekt is refocusing on what it is good at: stories heavy on choice and consequence. With expectations of some impossible *GTA* beater wiped away, we're excited to return to Night City with fresh eyes. And not just the Ripperdoc-implant kind.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Ubisoft Montpellier) **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** January

Arriving at SGF's Kickoff Live showcase late, and without a functioning phone or the ability to rewind time, we only learn about the new *Prince Of Persia* game after the fact. By the time we discover that its reveal attracted the ire of the Internet, we've already played it, and know for certain that the reaction is nonsense. It is a shame that Sargon and his ancient Persian Immortals are voiced as a bunch of Cockney lads, true, but we're not especially sympathetic to the cries for the still-absent *Sands Of Time* – were there not enough remakes this summer? And while Sargon's design is a little naff, surely that is in the grand tradition of the previous fellow, with his floppy curtains and soul patch.

Besides, all these concerns disappear with the very first backflip. Sargon is beautifully lithe, just as you'd expect from the Montpellier team behind *Rayman Legends*, and within minutes we're chaining together slides and wall jumps without a second thought. What initially look like fearsome gauntlets of spiked pits and swinging traps can, thanks to the responsive controls, be taken at a sprint. And even if things go wrong, the introduction of a teleport power, with which you can place down a copy of Sargon and rewind to that spot at the push of a button, makes it easy to cut your losses and try a different route.

Sargon is beautifully lithe, as you'd expect from the Montpellier team behind Rayman Legends

The fights, however, prove to be a little less forgiving. Sargon is armed with a sword, a bow with a limited quiver of arrows, and a magical throwable chakram blade, which recharges on a cooldown. Yet to prevail in combat you'll really need to master parry timing, which not only opens up enemies for a big counter but fills your special-ability meter: one bar unleashes a screen-filling attack, while two drops a generous healing zone.

Thinking we've got all this cracked, we take on the game's first big boss: a mantichore-like creature that strikes with its barbed scorpion tail and summons health-sapping clouds that chase you around the arena.

It's a battle that utilises everything we've learned: sliding under its stomach to attack the monster's rear while it's busy spitting poison; using the teleport power to zap straight into an arrow shot from the opposite flank; parrying its headlong charge to buy a little healing time. Yet it bests us again and again, as the remaining minutes of our half-hour appointment tick down and down. We leave wishing that we too had the ability to rewind time – but it's to *The Lost Crown's* credit that we are drawn back to its station the following day, blitzing through the entire level on Switch (running at a steady 60fps, no less) just for the chance to beat the barb-tailed boss. Well, better late than never.



ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

Developer FromSoftware **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** August 25

It's been over ten years since the previous instalment of FromSoftware's mech battler, and in that time things have changed significantly for the studio – it's now one of the most respected in the world. Naturally, then, this is being presented as something of a reboot, reflected by the choice of director: Masaru Yamamura, a newcomer to this series who got his start on *Dark Souls* and worked his way up to lead designer of *Sekiro*.

There's talk of similarly intertwined level design, which will be a minor miracle if it can be pulled off, given the enormity of the industrial superstructures you're travelling through, and the tools you have to do it. Remember how much of a

revelation it felt being able to jump at will in *Elden Ring*? Well, here you can skate around on boosters, fire into a long jump and shoot skywards with your jetpack. Combat, too, with its smoke-trailing missiles and rocket-boost dashes, doesn't at first seem have much in common with hiding behind a shield and waiting for the right moment to release a long sword sweep. Still, the basic rhythm – circling foes, dodging stabs with a perfectly timed leap, staggering with a counter – looks intact, albeit with the tempo sped up. And in case there's any doubt that the DNA of this new FromSoft is there, our demo ends with a battle against a boss the size of an office building.



KUNITSU-GAMI: PATH OF THE GODDESS

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

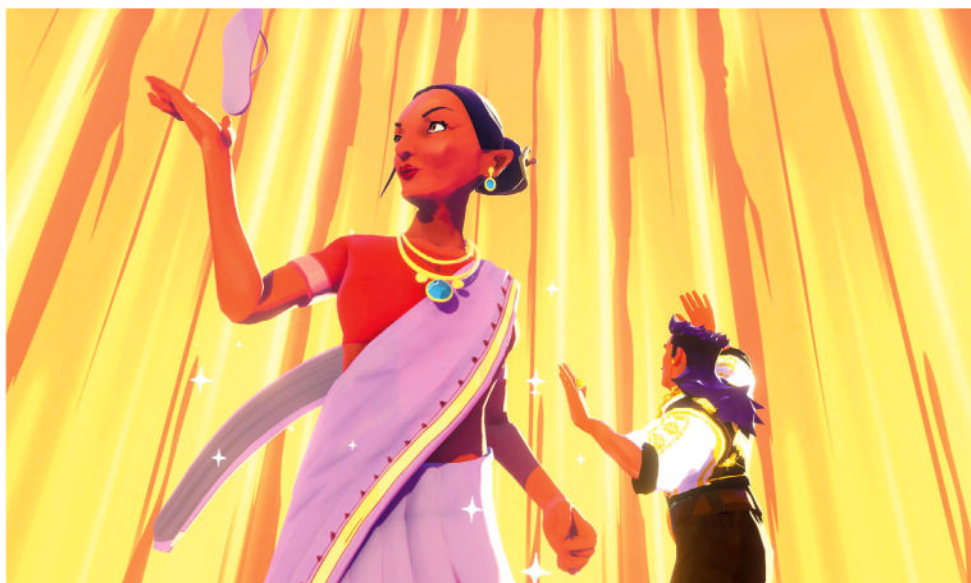
Oily tendrils leave a temple pathway blanketed in a dark ooze. Disembodied demon arms reach through the ground, their grasping hands stretching up the pillars of torii gates and emerging from the doorways of an overgrown village. Then, via a kaleidoscopic transition, a masked warrior arrives. Wielding a katana to carve a path through the blight and dispelling curses with a burst of sakura petals, they battle otherworldly fiends with flourishing strikes, acrobatic dodges and powerful area-of-effect spells. Offering some of the most extraordinary art and animation of the summer showcases, Capcom's latest is so steeped in Japanese myth that its title is presented in kanji. We detect shades of *Onimusha* and FromSoftware's *Otogi*, while its publisher has likened it to *Okami* and *Shinsekai: Into The Depths* – a combination as mouthwatering as its aesthetic.



METAPHOR RE FANTAZIO

Developer/publisher Sega (Atlus)
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

One of the more persistent Not-E3 rumours was that Atlus had leaked its two *Persona*-themed announcements so it could blindsides us with the reveal of the latest game from the series' core team. Either way, the reappearance of the game formerly known by the codename *Project Re Fantasy* was one of the biggest surprises of the Xbox showcase. Director Katsura Hashino suggests this could be Atlus' 'third pillar', alongside *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Persona*, the series with which he's most closely associated. While it marks a shift from a contemporary setting, the studio has expressed a desire to steer away from conventional medieval fantasy, while retaining Atlus' distinctive visual signature. That is evident from the fashions and environment designs on show in the (slightly choppy) in-game footage. The UI, meanwhile, is as stylish as ever.

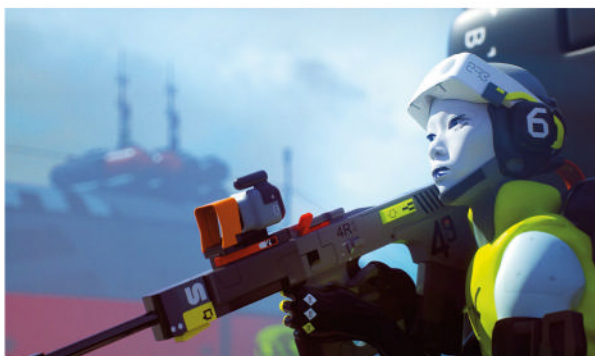


THIRSTY SUITORS

Developer Outerloop Games **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

This is our third summer with *Thirsty Suitors*: after Outerloop's next project was first teased at the inaugural Annapurna Interactive showcase in 2021, we got our hands on a combat-focused demo at the following year's Tribeca, where it took home the Special Jury Award. But there's enough game here that we still have to book two slots with it at this year's Play Days: one to sample its skateboarding, and one to get stuck into cooking. The former leans heavily on *Tony Hawk's*, with a similar enough mix of manuals, grinds and tricks that muscle memory gets us through most of its challenges, though that comparison also highlights how much harder it is to gather

momentum here. Cookery, meanwhile, is a way of serving up dialogue and building out your character's relationship with her parents, mechanically borrowing from the game's take on JRPG combat, where you select moves each turn then complete QTEs to decide how well it goes. Playing its discrete parts this way, we can't quite see how they'll come together. But that suits Jala Jayaratne, a protagonist overflowing with personality and pulled between multiple identities. It's telling that, as we switch between the modes, Jala changes outfits – and that she does so in a single sweep, bringing an Edgar Wright-style action-movie flourish to even the most mundane parts of life.



MARATHON

Developer Bungie **Publisher** SIE
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

There's no doubt that Bungie makes some of the best-feeling shooters in the biz, but the choice *Destiny* offers between itself and the rest of your life isn't for everyone. Seeing the studio's name on that spaceship corridor wall during Sony's showcase, then, is cause enough for celebration. But whatever the developer, we're ready to get out the champagne for a game that looks like this. A Day-Glo glitch aesthetic, QR-coded silkworms, hardware that nods to the era from which the original *Marathon* hails, combining the 'clear craze' for translucent tech with the plastic curves of early PlayStation design – it's so striking that even the news that *Marathon* will be a live-service *Tarkov*-style extraction shooter isn't enough to dampen our enthusiasm. Just one question, Bungie: how much of our life will we have to give over this time?



CART LIFE

Developer Richard Hofmeier **Publisher** AdHoc Studio
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2023

It's hard not to lapse into Damon Albarn when saying the title aloud, but given the miserabilist tone of Richard Hofmeier's bleak but empathetic retail simulation, that would be inappropriate. Ten years have passed since Hofmeier's tale of three struggling street vendors won multiple awards at the IGF, including the Seumas McNally Grand Prize, and nine since he delisted it from Steam. With the help of the ex-Telltale team at AdHoc Studio, it's been revived, with new story elements, improved art and updated controls. Whether you play as Andrus (a Ukrainian immigrant who owns a newspaper stand), Vinny (who dreams of making it big by selling bagels) or single mother Melanie (facing a custody battle while running a coffee cart), you're forced to balance your personal needs with those of your business. A decade on, it still feels troublingly relevant.



PRAGMATA

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

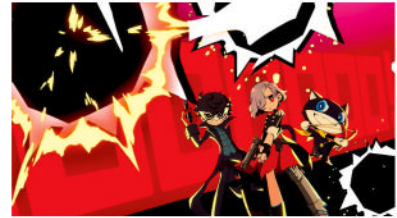
A girl scribbles on a scrap of paper as a man fends off attacking androids. "Aren't we there yet?" she asks as he scoops her up. "Sorry, kiddo. We still got a ways to go." The note floats down: next to a crossed-out '2022' and '2023' are a question mark and a sad-face emoji. Cute, but perhaps less time spent making apology videos would mean Capcom's science-fiction adventure gets here a little sooner.



ARIZONA SUNSHINE 2

Developer/publisher Vertigo Games
Format PCVR, PSVR2, Quest **Release** 2023

Appearing in both the Sony and Meta Quest showcases, this sequel promises to bring a new-gen sheen – and melee weapons – to one of VR's early successes, which took a sunny approach to putting holes in the undead. No word yet on whether the original's defining fourplayer co-op will return, but the addition of a canine companion suggests this might be just for you and your dog.



PERSONA 5 TACTICA

Developer/publisher Sega (Atlus)
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** November 17

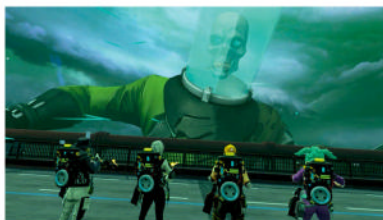
We wondered if the leaked name was a typo ('A' is next to 'S', after all), but after *Metaphor: ReFantazio* all Atlus title bets are off. This strategic spin-off takes the Phantom Thieves to an oppressive new realm, but they arrive with their powers intact, while a series of familiar Persona mechanics appear to be a natural fit for turn-based tactical combat.



CITIES: SKYLINES II

Developer Colossal Order **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** October 24

Colossal Order is leaning into the bigger-is-better model of sequelcraft, taking the solid foundations of *Cities: Skylines* and bolting more onto it. Its simulations will now be AI-assisted, helping power enormous metropolises within which you will be able to track the life path of each citizen, while its expanded climate system promises to add an extra layer of uncertainty to your worldbuilding.



GHOSTBUSTERS: RISE OF THE GHOST LORD

Developer nDreams **Publisher** Sony Pictures Virtual Reality
Format PSVR2, Quest 2/3/Pro **Release** Autumn

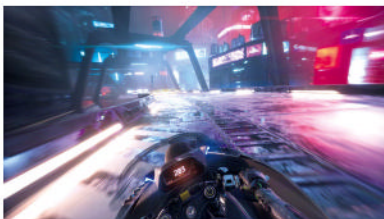
During E386's visit to nDreams, this was the one in-development game we weren't able to get our hands on, or head in. Its story-focused showing at the Meta event keeps things similarly under wraps. All of which might be a cause for concern, but that trip demonstrated the studio's dedication to VR control – and ultimately, what is a Proton Pack but a nuclear-accelerated version of a power washer?



JOHN CARPENTER'S TOXIC COMMANDO

Developer Saber Interactive **Publisher** Focus Entertainment
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

The horror-movie maestro is a vocal advocate for videogames, and he's lending his name to this co-op FPS – a lively *Left 4 Dead*-alike with an '80s-action-cinema vibe. Your group tackles zombies brought to life by the Sludge God, and not just on foot: we see our group ploughing through the undead in their van while singing along to Bon Jovi. Poisonous waste with extra cheese? It's oddly appealing.



GHOSTRUNNER 2

Developer One More Level **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

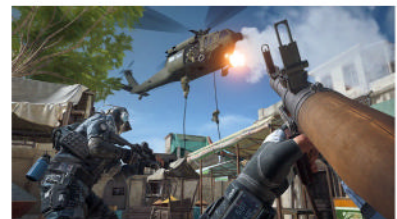
With its restrictive encounters and exacting traversal pairing awkwardly with its sky-high difficulty, we weren't as enamoured by *Ghostrunner* as some. Still, it felt a few tweaks away from something special, so we're prepared to give One More Level's followup the benefit of the doubt. Assuming, that is, its exhilarating-looking vehicular set-pieces don't go all *Battletoads* turbo tunnel on us.



FORGOTLINGS

Developer Throughline Games **Publisher** Hitcents
Format PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** Q2 2024

This sequel to 2018's *Forgotton Anne* promotes drawing-mannequin Fig to protagonist, a bold choice given his appearance (with his face in his stomach, it's little wonder he was cast aside). It's a more ambitious adventure than its predecessor, with a stronger focus on combat, but it retains the hand-animated aesthetic – the one element of the original game our brains haven't discarded since.



CROSSFIRE: SIERRA SQUAD

Developer/publisher Smilegate Entertainment
Format PCVR, PSVR2 **Release** August

The *Crossfire* brand name doesn't enjoy quite the same level of popularity here as it does at home in Korea, so a new instalment on hardware with a limited installed base might seem foolhardy. But *Sierra Squad* is a pretty easy sell, with a glossy campaign in the COD mould, plus Spec Ops-style co-op missions and a fourplayer Horde mode – the kind of thing we don't see enough in VR.



GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

Developer/publisher Ko-op Format PC, PS4, PS5 Release August 29

Talk about doomscrolling. Shortly after a news report announces the discovery of a ten-kilometre-wide asteroid set to enter Earth orbit with a “non-insignificant chance of collision”, protagonist Fang decides to check social media before turning in for the night. As they thumb their phone screen, among the inevitable jokes and memes are expressions of worry, fear, love and hope. One user declares it’s time to “live out every dumb impulse” they’ve ever had. Another suggests that this is far more dangerous than the media is letting on. The messages pile up, steadily filling the screen as an urgent ticking noise makes it clear that time is, indeed, running out. Leaving high school does feel a bit like a seismic event, but what if the apocalypse really was imminent?

Putting the terror in pterosaur, *Goodbye Volcano High*’s premise is acutely attuned to the anxieties of the Twitter era, despite having a cast more commonly associated with the Mesozoic. Given the title – and the fact you inhabit a world of anthropomorphic dinosaurs – we can be fairly confident that the asteroid will hit. Which means each choice you make seems to carry monumental significance: if you knew your time was limited, after all, you’d be very careful about what you said and did. And, for that matter, with whom you spent your remaining days.

This all comes at a particularly terrible time for poor Fang, non-binary vocalist in a three-piece punk band alongside drummer Reed and guitarist Trish. The group appears to be on the verge of a breakthrough as they prepare to graduate, though Trish in particular seems to be preoccupied. Indeed, Fang has a distraction of their own: a mystery admirer has texted them, declaring their affections without revealing their identity.

It’s the kind of appetite-whetter that makes it clear why it won this year’s Tribeca Games Award

Though there will be rhythm-action interludes throughout, the build we play focuses on the game’s narrative side, which takes the form of a handsomely animated visual novel. The writing is strong: while waiting for a lecture to begin, you can observe Fang’s classmates to reveal their thoughts, and several of these descriptions ring painfully true, from the unflappable cool girl to the

boy who fakes an interest in sport. Meanwhile, your choices – which require you to hold the stick in the appropriate direction to confirm them – are sometimes preceded by Fang’s thoughts, which hint at potential consequences. Major ones demand you squeeze both triggers, as if you’re tensing up before committing, the screen shaking to reflect Fang’s unease. It’s effective (and affecting) stuff, the kind of appetite-whetter that not only makes it clear why it won this year’s Tribeca Games Award, but will have you counting down the days until impact.



SONIC SUPERSTARS

Developer Arzest, Sonic Team **Publisher** Sega **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

The reveal of a new 2D *Sonic* at SGF's Kickoff show leaves a conclusion waiting to be jumped to. This, surely, must be the next game from the team behind *Mania*, a gang of Sonic fans made good. Instead, as our demo's opening splash reveals (or perhaps cautions), *Superstars* is the work of Arzest, the Naoto Ohshima-founded studio responsible for *Balan Wonderworld*.

As that might suggest, this is a throwback to, ahem, classic *Sonic*. There's such a heavy inertia to movement that we initially put it down to the framerate issues of an early build; afterwards we are assured by more dedicated students of the hedgehog that this is in fact perfectly faithful to how the

originals controlled. The trouble is that, without the protective abstraction of pixel art, it tends to feel floaty and unresponsive.

We're not sure the move to polygons is an improvement in any other sense, either – *Mania* demonstrated the beautiful work that can be done with sprites on modern hardware. *Superstars'* visuals, meanwhile, have all the personality of a *New Super Mario Bros* game. The new additions, though, are more promising. A power that sends stacks of Sonic clones across the screen, many to their doom, never fails to make us laugh, and the real test of *Superstars* will be how it handles fourplayer co-op. Chaos, surely – but of the good kind?



PENNY'S BIG BREAKAWAY

Developer Evening Star **Publisher** Private Division
Format PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** Early 2024

Ah, so *that's* why the *Sonic Mania* lot weren't available. For their next game, Christian Whitehead and team are making a breakaway of their own, both from Sega and from 16bit-style pixel art, with a 3D platformer seemingly inspired by the 64bit era. That raises the question of whether they'll handle the transition more like *Mario* or their old erinaceous pal, though perhaps the better comparison here is *Banjo-Kazooie*. There's a collectathon shape to the levels, and a range of abilities offered by Penny's yo-yo, swinging off rails, riding vertically along walls, transforming into a makeshift helicopter or wrecking ball as the situation demands. We're not sold on the look of Penny herself, but the proof will be in the jumping – the inclusion of a speedrun-ready Time Attack Mode, at least, suggests a confidence in the robustness of those mechanics.



THE TALOS PRINCIPLE 2

Developer Croteam **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

A decade is a long time to wait for a sequel, yet *The Talos Principle 2* feels oddly timely: never has it felt more plausible that self-aware androids could become the rulers of a ruined world. At least this post-apocalyptic playground is easy on the eyes, contrasting minimalistic spaces being reclaimed by nature with towering megastructures. The challenges appear to be less easygoing, thanks to the introduction of mechanics such as gravity manipulation. We glimpse that in action, a box carrying a drone being lifted into the air and its laser beam redirected through a portal, while the ability to walk on walls promises perspective-altering puzzles reminiscent of *Manifold Garden*. We remain curious about its narrative, which seems to examine the fundamental value of solving puzzles and the consequences of creating technology with a "free mind".

MULTIFORMAT



EL PASO, ELSEWHERE

Developer/publisher Strange Scaffold
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

‘YOU KEEP GOING’ – so much more encouraging than ‘YOU DIED’, isn’t it? Perish in Strange Scaffold’s intense action game and that motivational message appears onscreen before you’re thrust back into the fray. The game is a homage to *Max Payne* – visually, it’s akin to Remedy’s nightmare stages, with its labyrinthine levels, noirish voiceovers and trails of blood, but in play it’s all twin-pistol dives, slo-mo shotgun blasts and gulping down pills to recover your health. You keep going because you’ve no choice in the matter: protagonist James Savage is on a one-way trip to save the world from his vampiric ex. Despite the fantastical setting and themes, it feels like a personal project for creative lead Xalavier Nelson Jr, who provides Savage’s voiceover and also contributes to the soundtrack – rapping about “human sundaes” during a shootout.



LUSHFOIL PHOTOGRAPHY SIM

Developer Matt Newell **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, consoles TBA **Release** TBA

Back in **E348**, we spotlighted environment artist Matt Newell’s *Wakamarina Valley, NZ* – a short firstperson photography sim in which you explore and take snapshots of an Antipodean woodland – as one of our highlights of the Itch.io Bundle For Racial Justice And Equality. A keen photographer, Newell has been releasing a string of convincing 3D settings on Itch for several years, from the shrine at Fushimi Inari Taisha in Kyoto to the hills of Chamonix in the French Alps via the Icelandic coast of Myrdalssandur. These locations and more feature in the full game where, along with a simulated DSLR camera, you’ll find a drone to take aerial shots and a kayak to paddle downstream. Squeezing the trigger to auto-focus (don’t worry, there’s a manual option, too) before pressing it fully to take a snap feels as true to life as the virtual destinations.



LIL' GUARDSMAN

Developer Hilltop Studios **Publisher** Versus Evil **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

Deciding who to let in and who should be denied entry? Working the gate of a fantasy castle town turns out to be a bit of a busman’s holiday from the process of determining 100 games to make the cut in this issue’s Hype special. Hilltop Studios’ whimsical *Papers Please*-like lacks the time pressures (and moral weight) of the game to which it owes a debt. But it has plenty to distinguish it: as 12-year-old Lil, filling in for her dad while he attends a sporting tournament, you have a range of ways to help you decide whom to admit. You’re afforded three action points to make your choice: a trio of advisors are effectively your Phone-A-Friend, while a truth spray and metal detector might help you spot potential smugglers. These tools run on a limited supply of crystals, though, so a fresh approach is required for subsequent visitors.



ETERNIGHTS

Developer/publisher Studio Sai **Format** PC, PS4, PS5 **Release** 2023

If *Goodbye Volcano High* takes an introspective approach to the topic of love at the end of the world, *Eternights*’ cast aren’t letting an apocalyptic scenario affect their fixation on getting jiggy with it. When not discussing their dire situation – caused by an anti-ageing drug that turns victims into mindless creatures – these characters have one-track minds. There’s an almost Jay-from-Inbetweeners vibe to your silent protagonist’s best friend Chari, whose first thought when getting ‘essentials’ for their bunker is to scoop up a stash of porn magazines. Attempt to interact with a tissue box, meanwhile, and a caption admonishes you: “Now is not the time for that!”

When the two venture outside and bump into two similarly aged girls, then, you fear the worst. Here, there is indeed a little less conversation and a little more action – but not of the kind the boys were hoping for. Nor us, it turns out: battling these mutated foes merely involves mashing one button before pressing another to deal more substantial damage. The timing window for a Witch Time-like dodge is so generous as to make encounters laughably simple. Perhaps these battles – and the boys’ attitudes – will become more nuanced as the game progresses. But this leaves us thirsting for something deeper and more meaningful.



DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Developer/publisher Capcom Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Release TBA

Capcom's recent history is one of fruitful consolidation: eight of its ten best-selling games as a publisher have come in the past seven years, a result of a commitment to refinements and remakes for its most established series. In doing so, it has played to its considerable strengths, though it's been equally hard not to miss its more creatively fecund periods: the kind that produced the *Capcom Five*, the Capcom that gave us *Okami*, *Dead Rising*, *Zack & Wiki* and *Asura's Wrath*. But having cemented its reputation for quality, there is a sense that it's now ready to take a few more chances. Calculated risks, maybe, though it's fair to say that the Capcom of five years ago might not have considered a sequel to *Dragon's Dogma*.

At that time, director Hideaki Itsuno would have been working on *Devil May Cry 5*, an entry surely only the most blinkered of nostalgists would now deny as the series' pinnacle. Perhaps that game's success gave him the cachet to pitch a followup to the 2011 original, an action RPG that was well received in Japan, outstripping sales expectations, but underperformed somewhat in the west. Yet its reputation overseas has only grown over time, the rapturous reception that greeted its late-May State Of Play showing a testament to the affection in which it is now held.

The perfect conditions, in other words, for a sequel to flourish. There's no denying the visual enhancement – while it might lack the slickness of Capcom's biggest games, many a *Dragon's Dogma* player will tell you that's all part of the charm – and yet given the opportunity to discuss what's new and improved, the publisher first opted to highlight what has remained the same. In the case of the game's pawn system that's understandable: you're joined

by a computer-controlled character designed to feel like a human partner, alongside two support pawns created by other players. They remain a constant throughout, and it's hard not to grow attached to them, their efforts to help you in battle generating a curious surge of pride – one that is likely to be all the more potent now they're capable of "more precise actions", as Itsuno puts it.

Indeed, after vanquishing a difficult opponent, they'll even be able to give you a high five.

All of this takes place in a world purportedly four times bigger than the first, with the promise of more versatile vocations, improved physics and a broader array of options to tackle enemies – such as luring them to a rickety bridge before making it collapse. But it's how well it captures the feel of cooperative action in a singleplayer game that will determine whether Capcom's top ten will have a new entry within the next couple of years.

Having cemented its reputation for quality, there is a sense that it's now ready to take a few more chances

MULTIFORMAT



MONSTER HUNTER NOW

Developer/publisher Niantic
Format Android, iOS Release September

Niantic has been in search of its next perfect match ever since *Pokémon* – who'd have thought that the answer might be another, considerably larger, set of monsters? Getting our hands on this tie-in, we're surprised to discover just how much of Capcom's ARPG series the developer manages to cram in. The controls for combat are simple yet flexible enough to account for all the usual weapon types: tap to attack, block for special, swipe to move or dodge in that direction. Specific body parts can be targeted with a poke of the finger – and, as in the main games, lopped-off bits can be used to craft or reinforce weapons and armour. It's the full, familiar loop, but condensing what might take the best part of an hour into 75-second battles. The series has a long history on portable devices, of course, but it's nice to have these monsters back in our pocket.



LIES OF P

Developer/publisher Neowiz
Format PC, PS5 Release September 19

You're familiar with the term Soulslike. Consider this the 'Borne-identical. An opening caption offered "in honour of the great writer Carlo Collodi" would be better stating admiration for "the great game director Hidetaki Miyazaki" – who, if imitation really is the sincerest form of flattery, must be blushing. It's telling that barely a week had passed before modding group Garden Of Eyes had added *Bloodborne's* Hunter weapons and gear to the demo. There are a few new ideas here: rather than recovering health by attacking after being struck, you gradually fill restorative pulse cells, staggering enemies works slightly differently, and there are powerful Arts to unleash. Otherwise, this feels like a somewhat witless imitation, enlivened by some bizarre terminology: your skill tree, incredibly, is called the 'P-Organ'. Now that's *really* taking the P.



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Bordeaux) Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series Release October 12

After expanding outwards ever further with its most recent trilogy of RPG-skewed games, and with the long-touted *Infinity* still waiting to rear its head, there was only really one way *Assassin's Creed* could go next. And so here it is, the inevitable refocusing on the series' social-stealth roots, with a literal return to where it all began: the Arab world during the Islamic Golden Age, in this case ninth-century Baghdad.

You're rewarded for sneaking, with each stealth assassination charging up a Focus ability that can chain kills like *Red Dead Redemption's* Dead Eye. Protagonist Basim is equipped with gadgets that allow him to disappear in a cloud

of smoke or put guards to sleep with a blow dart, and sufficient charm to work his way into crowds unseen. Most importantly, a knife in the back will once more take down its victim in a single strike, irrespective of any stat levelling.

In line with the cheaper price point – £45 on consoles, rather than the now-standard £70 – *Mirage* promises to be a smaller game (at least by Ubi standards; over 500 developers are working on it). As our open-world fatigue worsens with every wide horizon we encounter, this is about the only thing the series could have done to grab our attention. Well, until *Infinity* reveals what's up its sleeve. A hidden blade, no doubt.



BABY STEPS

Developer Gabe Cuzzillo, Maxi Boch, Bennett Foddy **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, PS5 **Release** 2024

Nate is a pudgy 35-year-old living in his parents' basement, slumped in front of the TV in an ill-fitting onesie. When the screen glitches out, he grabs the remote, only to be instantly transported into a pool of water. Paddling desperately towards the surface, he emerges, tries to put one foot in front of the other... and promptly falls flat on his face.

His gait will be familiar to anyone of a certain age who's tried to get up after hours on the sofa, but here it's a more permanent feature. As he pulls himself up, a caption appears, telling us that, in addition to the developer of *Ape Out* (Gabe Cuzzillo), *Baby Steps* comes from the creator of *Getting Over*

It. But it would perhaps have been more instructive to cite Bennett Foddy's *QWOP*. This is that, essentially, in a 3D open world. Or *Death Stranding* if Sam Porter Bridges was learning to walk. Here, the landscape is not the hazard – you are.

In other words, it's another game about purposely awkward traversal, a literal walking simulator that finds comedy in clumsiness. Here's Nate, ragdolling off a narrow cliffside path. There he is again, losing his footing and sliding helplessly down a muddy hill. And now he's kicking over a cairn, much to the chagrin of a nearby hiker – prompting the one other (deserved) use of "wanker" in this year's summer showcases.



HELLBOY: WEB OF WYRD

Dev Upstream Arcade **Pub** Good Shepherd Ent. **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

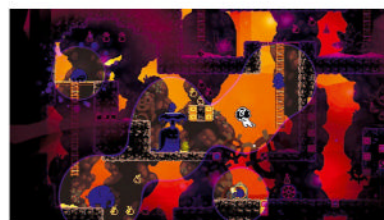
It's been three years since the latest film adaptation of Mike Mignola's creation, and the stench of its awfulness has just about dissipated. But Upstream Arcade is taking no chances, distancing itself by going back to where it all began. As such, *Web Of Wyrd's* story has been created with input from Mignola and Dark Horse Comics, and involves the half-demon being dragged into the eponymous dimension, to face off against a range of terrifying creatures. There's a real sense of thumping heft and impact to these thirdperson brawls – if nothing else, *Hellboy* is handy with his fists – while the Roguelike structure should lend encounters an extra frisson. Mignola's designs, meanwhile, slot neatly into these shadowy surroundings, which borrow from the visual approach taken by the developer for its twin-stick shooter *West Of Dead*.



THE CREW: MOTORFEST

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Ivory Tower) **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** September 14

In *E322's* review of *The Crew 2* (where it picked up a 5, for those keeping score) we suggested that Ubisoft's Ivory Tower studio was on a hiding to nothing trying to squeeze the entirety of the United States into a single game. "Compare it to *Forza Horizon 4*, say, and the difference is stark," we wrote. "*Horizon's* map is still vast, but the smaller scale allows Playground to fill it with local colour and detail, making it feel all the more authentic." The publisher appears to have reached the same conclusions in preparation for this followup. It hasn't entirely ditched the US for *Motorfest*, but it has zoomed in on a single state, and then further still, condensing its action to – well now, this is awkward – an automobile festival on the Hawaiian island of O'ahu, where, of course, another open-world car series, *Test Drive Unlimited*, was set.



KARMAZOO

Developer Pastagames **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Is it strictly altruism to do someone a kindness on the understanding that you'll get something in return? Then again, how do you mechanically communicate the joy of having helped someone out of a tight spot? There's a gentle tension at the heart of Pastagames' cooperative platformer, which presents you with a set of obstacle courses to negotiate alongside up to nine other players. Despite the hazards, this is a fairer place than our own world, as there is some form of karmic reward for good deeds: experienced players effectively play sherpa to beginners, with boosted abilities to give them a leg-up. It's a chaotic experience at first, as you fumble about in the dark, trying to remain within the bubble that keeps the pack close, lest you fall outside their sphere of helpful influence. But, this being a Pastagames affair, it's joyously upbeat too.



LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

Developer/publisher Sega (RGG Studio) **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** Early 2024

When the *Like A Dragon* series (née *Yakuza*) has had plot twists as preposterous as the most outlandish of its sidestories, it's hard to say whether or not it has already jumped the shark (indeed, those who invested in *Yakuza 0*'s spear-fishing minigame will recall that Kazuma Kiryu has already punched one). Still, given that game was supposed to be the former leading man's swan song, the decision to bring him back is at best contentious. Already set to return in *Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name*, he's due to feature as protagonist alongside Ichiban Kasuga in *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth* sporting a silver wig – a naff disguise, perhaps, but one that makes him look younger.

Yet for longtime followers of the series, as well as voice actor Takaya Kuroda, it's difficult to resist Kiryu's stoic presence, no matter how ludicrous the circumstance. It certainly won't be a simple retread, as he swaps his signature grey jacket and red shirt for a dark suit, becoming a secret agent with the codename Joryu in *The Man Who Erased His Name*. That perhaps isn't what you might expect from The Dragon Of Dojima, though it's far from the most unusual profession he's held in a varied CV that includes orphanage manager, taxi driver, real-estate king and phone sex operator, to name but a

few. Meanwhile, those spy gadgets, including a wire that can wrap around enemies and objects, look set to spice up the usual brawls.

In any case, Kiryu's return doesn't seem to have stolen Kasuga's spotlight, the latter getting the more prominent reveal. And revealing it certainly is, as he finds himself waking up on a beach in his birthday suit, prompting a sequence that somehow manages to recall *Austin Powers* while still succeeding in providing amusement.

More significantly, the setting shows the series has moved onto foreign soil for the first time – while RGG Studio hasn't explicitly confirmed it, telltale signs indicate that this is Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, Hawaii (which will probably have a fictionalised name in the final game).

A location that already has strong historical and cultural ties with Japan seems a more appropriate fit than a total uprooting. But this is nonetheless another sign of a series embracing its global appeal, reflected by its growing international community in recent years, with Sega choosing to reveal the title on Xbox's stage. That said, there are still scant details on how this will play, and whether it will continue *LAD7*'s pastiche of turn-based party RPGs. Further details should emerge at the next RGG Summit, which will probably coincide with TGS so as not to neglect its Japanese audience. Some old habits die hard.

It's difficult to resist Kiryu's stoic presence, no matter how ludicrous the circumstance



BALDUR'S GATE 3

Developer/publisher Larian Studios
Format PC, PS5 **Release** August 31

With a development cycle tracing back to the beginning of the pandemic, it's been tantalising to watch the release date of Larian's take on this classic series inch ever closer. Admittedly, this excitement is mostly based on its progress over three years in Early Access: Larian's presentations at Summer Game Fest and the PC Gaming Show reveal little beyond the existence of Lord Enver Gortash (played by Jason Isaacs) and a deeper dive into Baldur's Gate itself. The city will be fully explorable without loading screens, and contains a broad assortment of fantasy tropes: our brief flyover showcases hulking pirate ships, a cacodemon nailed to a tavern wall, and one miniature flying elephant, to name but a few. And in keeping with series tradition, there will be many opportunities to wreak havoc. We'd expect nothing less from the modern masters of the CRPG.



STAR OCEAN: THE SECOND STORY R

Developer Square Enix, Gemdrops Inc. **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch **Release** November 2

Whoever at Square Enix Business Division 11 or Acquire first came up with the idea of the (now trademarked) 'HD-2D' aesthetic for the original *Octopath Traveler* is surely overdue a public show of gratitude, or at the very least a hefty pay rise. It continues to prove its worth as a cost-effective way of adding visual pizzazz to comparatively low-budget projects, and makes sense for remakes that combine elements old and new. To wit: this new version of the second, and what most still regard as the finest, entry in the *Star Ocean* series, which has pixel-art characters trotting about realistically lit 3D environments. *The Second Story's* realtime combat benefits from enhancements, too: characters in your current party are capable of stunning enemies with chain attacks, while benched allies can be temporarily tagged in to unleash followup moves.



GHOST BIKE

Developer Messhof **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

"The ride of your afterlife" could well be the finest tagline of the summer, albeit a slightly misleading one when you consider the studio behind it. Despite the title and premise – you're a capable cyclist seeking to revive a courier who once travelled between the worlds of the dead and the living – California-based Messhof has pivoted away from the purgatorial setting and gleeful cartoon ultraviolence of *Nidhogg* and its sequel. Here, you find yourself in much brighter, sunnier climes – the gorgeous flat-shaded aesthetic suggests *Sable* via *Season: A Letter To The Future*, but set in and around the rustic towns and peaceful countryside of a

coastal Mediterranean region. With a breathy synth-pop soundtrack care of record label Italians Do It Better (which you may know from its work on Ryan Gosling's directorial debut, *Lost River*), the vibe is wonderfully dulcet. Which isn't to say that your mission is any less urgent: you'll need to race other ghosts and complete stunt challenges to repair and maintain your ramshackle ride. With unlockable parts tucked away in this pseudo-open world, you can customise your build, though your ultimate goal is to boost your bike's power in order to make it all the way to the other side. Fingers crossed that in *this* particular realm we don't end up as worm food.



ALAN WAKE 2

Developer Remedy Entertainment **Publisher** Epic Games **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** October 17

Sitting down with Remedy's Sam Lake to discuss the behind-closed-doors demo we've just been shown, we can't help but notice his outfit. There's the trademark sharp jacket, naturally, but beneath it, a Twin Peaks T-shirt. To borrow a phrase from someone we've always thought of as a kindred spirit to Alan (both are similarly fond of purple prose and know their way around a Dark Place): we know writers who use subtext, and they're all cowards.

2017's *The Return*, Lake confirms, was indeed a big influence on this 13-years-in-the-making sequel. Just like Kyle MacLachlan's Agent Cooper, Wake has spent the time since the previous instalment trapped in another dimension while his doppelgänger walks the earth in his place, and time has passed in the story just as it has in reality, as our man returns to a very changed world. Videogames have changed too, of course, which is why you start the game not as Wake but as Saga



There's a real sense of place to Bright Falls and Cauldron Lake. As you explore and uncover new facts, more of the region opens up

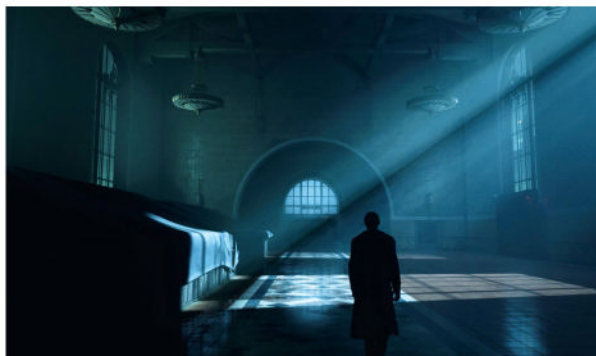
Anderson, an FBI agent investigating grisly murders in the town of Bright Falls. Now, where could *that* idea possibly have come from?

Lynch is not the only influence, though. Remedy is keen to emphasise that this is a survival horror game, as opposed to the original's action horror, folding in everything from *The Silence Of The Lambs* to the work of Ari Aster and the first season of *True Detective*. But the most immediate comparison is *Resident Evil* – there are limited save rooms, a fuse-hunting section, a spot of inventory *Tetris*, a moment when someone bursts from an unexpected place – and especially the recent remakes, with which it shares an over-the-shoulder perspective. Yet somehow, despite its relatively small development team, *Alan Wake 2* manages to graphically outshine even Capcom's most recent work with its RE

Engine. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised: Remedy has long punched above its weight in terms of wrangling technology.

The visuals are most striking as the demo goes beyond what Remedy showed on stage and tumbles into dream logic. As Anderson gets lost in the woods, her surroundings begin to take on other shapes. The trees become the walls of an alleyway as the canopy of leaves overhead begin to curve like the roof of a subway tunnel. Again we think of *Twin Peaks*, and how Glastonbury Grove is overlaid with the curtains of the Red Room – but seeing this effect in full 3D, with the player able to move the camera, is unlike anything we've experienced before. Remedy might wear its influences on its sleeve, but the only truly accurate comparison for its games is the studio's own, strange work.

MULTIFORMAT



BLADE RUNNER 2033: LABYRINTH

Developer/publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, consoles TBA **Release** TBA

Annapurna Interactive's late-June showcase offered a very different flavour of science fiction from Pandora's colourful frontiers (below) – and an adaptation of a filmic property that would seem to hew rather closer to the spirit of its inspiration. The publisher delivered a tease of its first internally developed game, and it's a big one. The date puts *Labyrinth* almost equidistant between Ridley Scott's original and Denis Villeneuve's sequel on the Blade Runner timeline, and between glimpses of a futuristic-looking LAPD lanyard, a car flying through a rain-lashed cityscape, the world-weary voiceover and ominous synth score, that universe was identifiable long before the title reveal confirmed it. There's little further info, but there are clues here to suggest this is a detective game of sorts: one in which you'll sift through memories, and perhaps even edit them.



WIZARD WITH A GUN

Developer Galvanic Games **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Format PC, Switch **Release** 2023

After playing this sandbox survival game for a couple of hours, it's tempting to wonder if Devolver heard the name and signed it up sight unseen. It's been a while since we've encountered a game with such a chasm between its title and the experience of playing it. To rebuild a shattered world, your pistol-toting mage must gather resources and craft buildings in their tower, while locating gears for a machine that can wind back the clock to a time before it was destroyed, gradually letting you explore more of it. Then again, you're responsible for plenty of destruction, spending a good chunk of your time breaking up objects and using their parts to craft ammo to shoot enemies. Perhaps it's a joke on the fact that wizards don't traditionally use guns, but somehow the combat is just as tedious as all the resource management.



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Massive Entertainment) **Format** Luna, PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** December 7

It's ironic, given *Far Cry 2*'s role in their genesis, how much the Ubisoft mode of open-world game design reinforces colonialist values. Expanding the boundaries of your territory and stripping it of natural resources is, to put it in Avatar terms, the purview not of the Na'vi but the Resources Development Administration. Which makes it a strange decision to adapt James Cameron's unusually hippie-spirited action movies into the *Far Cry* format.

There are signs that Massive Entertainment is grappling with that conflict – an introductory presentation tells us you're encouraged to "take only what you need" when gathering materials for crafting and cooking, with mechanical rewards

for careful harvesting. The violence, however, is less carefully offset. You're cast as a "child of two worlds" – flipping the original film's premise on its head, a Pandora native raised by the RDA military. In other words, a Na'vi that uses guns.

Seeing an assault rifle poking out of the bottom of the screen, held in blue hands, feels quite odd, as if it's been modded into the game for fun. Fortunately, this isn't your only option. The Na'vi weapons – bow, sling and spear thrower – support a more precise, sneaky approach. At least until an arrow's explosive payload brings down an RDA gunship. That's one way of dealing with those pesky colonisers.



FLOCK

Developer Hollow Ponds, Richard Hogg **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Perhaps we were naïve ever to think it, but we remember hoping that the kind of visual fidelity made possible by current-gen hardware would gradually lead to the eradication of the ‘not gameplay footage’ CG teaser. Yet they were all over the place at this year’s summer showcases, and not just as a flashy way to introduce the very biggest games. In fairness, polishing up multiple sections of a game to a satisfactory sheen – enough, at least, to avoid the intense scrutiny of the Internet’s metaphorical Eye Of Sauron – is no minor feat when you’re still trying to make the thing. Still, we can’t help but lament the relatively small number of trailers that decided to simply show us how the game in question actually played.

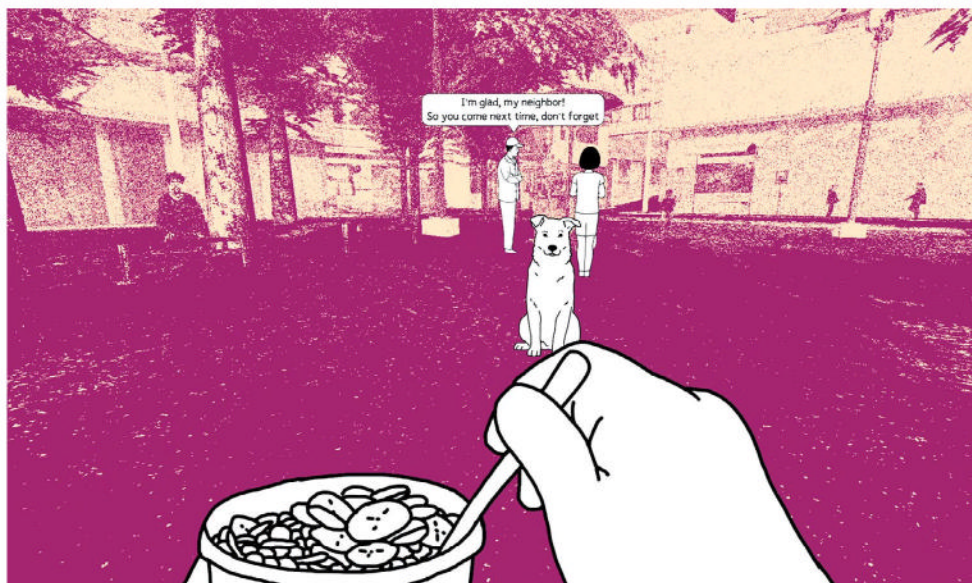
Three cheers, then, for Annapurna Interactive granting the makers of *Flock* three minutes of its showcase to do just that. It helps, of course, that even after Hollow Ponds’ best attempts to describe it to us in E376, it’s much more easily understood when you see it in action. Likewise that we have two such agreeable hosts in “art guy” Richard Hogg and Pip Warr, responsible for “narrative design and some game design”. At its core, Hogg says, this is a game about “exploring a big, wild place on the back of a bird”. But it’s also tapping into the increasingly popular idea of the videogame as

a hangout spot – and in that regard, this should offer a relatively peaceful, calming alternative to the likes of *Fortnite*, *Destiny* and *Sea Of Thieves*. You’re free to roam this shared world either separately or with someone else: enter a friend’s game and they can press a button to call out, which pinpoints their position on your screen so you can fly over to join them.

As well as exploring, it’s tapping into the idea of the videogame as a hangout spot

Your goal is to grow your flock by charming the creatures of the world: to gain the trust of one species, slumbering gently by a pond in a patch of secluded woodland, you need to position yourself so that your bird and the rest of the flock are close enough to sing to it without scaring it off before they can win it over. (It’s safe to assume that different approaches are required for different creatures; certainly some will only

show up at specific times of day.) Invariably, your own flock will be distinct from another player’s, and you’ll naturally compare notes on how and where to obtain them. And you’ll also have a handful of sheep, which can be left awhile to graze, their wool becoming wearable hats and scarves. The general aura of strangeness offsets the moments when it threatens to become dangerously twee, while zooming through undulating clouds as a pair carries pleasant echoes of *Journey* and *Alto’s Odyssey*. Delightful.



DESPELOTE

Developer Julián Cordero, Sebastian Valbuena **Publisher** Panic **Format** PC, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

Having beaten Brazil and Paraguay in their opening matches, Ecuador have made the ideal start to their 2001 World Cup qualifying campaign, as they attempt to reach the finals for the first time. Unaware they're currently playing Peru, the football-mad Julián has commandeered the family TV to play a top-down *Kick-Off*-style videogame. Gradually, the camera zooms out, until his father obscures the screen as he goes to change the channel. Julián holds out his hands in exasperation, before settling down to watch the end of the game. Breaking clear, striker Agustín 'Tin' Delgado strokes the ball home in the 90th minute to win the game. World Cup fever has arrived in Quito.

All this, and everything that follows, plays out through Julián's eyes: soon after, he's drifting off in a lesson, gazing out of the window to watch a kickabout between strangers at his local park before the bell rings and he races out of the classroom, using the same controls as the videogame to kick the ball around, knocking over cones and passing to friends. Later, when the group is punctured by a dog, Julián steals one belonging to a group of older kids – though when they catch up with him he's shoved to the ground ("fucking kid"). Like playing the lead role in a foreign-language arthouse animation, this atmospheric slice-of-life drama is an unalloyed delight.



SAND LAND

Developer ILCA Inc **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** TBD

"Based on a classic manga, with a story and world created by one of the most celebrated artists of all time." For one breath-held moment, after Keighley cues up SGF's next 'world premiere', we hope we're finally about to see a videogame tackle the work of Junji Ito – but we'll have to leave that kind of territory for our next game. And you can hardly begrudge Akira Toriyama another videogame adaptation – even putting aside all the *Dragon Ball* entries down the years, the man's character designs for *Dragon Quest* and *Chrono Trigger* helped define the look of the JRPG. 2000's *Sand Land* is a lesser-known work, and relatively slim: a mere 14 chapters to *Dragon Ball*'s 519. But Toriyama's style is unmistakable, even as the game's visuals blend the fine linework of its characters, monsters and (customisable) vehicles with more blankly 'realistic' environmental art.



WORLD OF HORROR

Developer Panstasz **Publisher** Ysbryd Games, Playism **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch **Release** October 19

After more than three years in Early Access, Paweł Kozmiński's haunting RPG anthology (co-written with author Cassandra Khaw) is almost set for its full release. Though it will be coming to a variety of consoles, its natural home is on PC, not just for its deliberately ungainly point-and-click interface but its 1bit aesthetic. A tribute to horror veterans such as Lovecraft and Ito, it tasks you with investigating five mysteries in a sleepy Tokyo village about to welcome the arrival of one of the Old Gods. Random events and dice rolls add unpredictability, while the lo-fi presentation only compounds the uncanniness of the terrors you face in turn-based combat. Unlockable card packs add modularity: you'll have more mysteries to solve when you finish the main story, while an Endless Mode is all about postponing the inevitable, as you survive for as long as you can.



ASSASSIN'S CREED NEXUS VR

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Red Storm)
Format Quest 2/3/Pro **Release** Late 2023

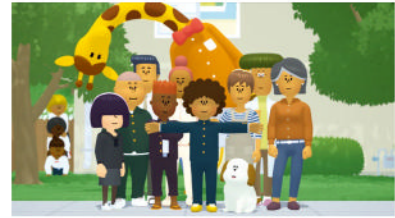
We recently got to take a look at a next-gen prototype at nDreams using proprietary techniques to make possible the kind of manoeuvres that would have been unimaginable in VR not long ago – at least, if you wanted to hold onto your lunch. If we hadn't seen that, *Assassin's Creed* parkour in firstperson VR would be unappealing. But assuming Ubisoft has employed some of the same tricks (and the involvement of *Star Trek: Bridge Crew* developer Red Storm is encouraging), we're itching to explore the city rooftops. The game is something of a best-of compilation, hopping between Ezio, Kassandra and Connor (well, what's a Greatest Hits without a filler track or two?), as well as modern-day Abstergo sections that look set to skewer social-media privacy concerns. You have to wonder how that one went over at the Meta pitch meeting.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

Developer Saber Interactive **Publisher** Focus Entertainment
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** Winter

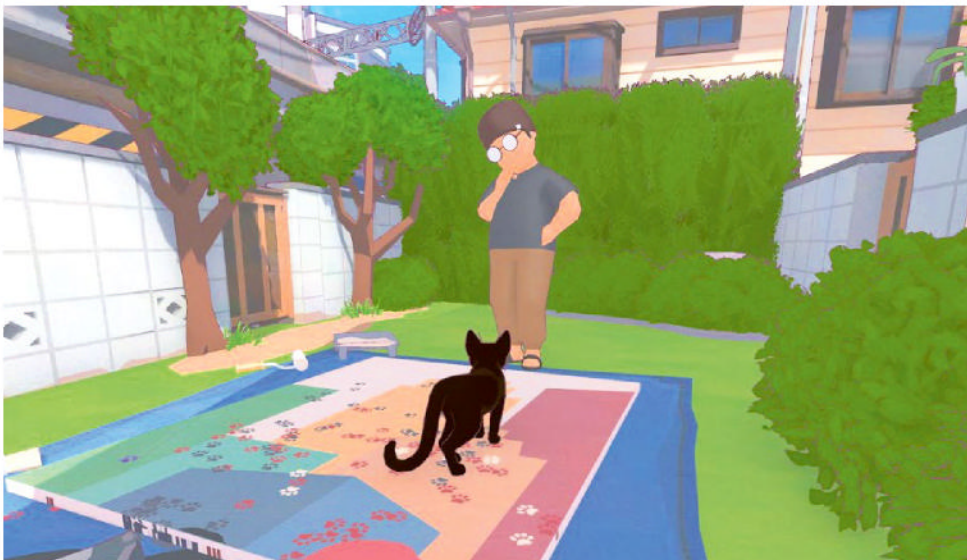
Blood fills the screen as our protagonist dispatches extraterrestrial foes in gruesome fashion, whether using a chainsaw-sword hybrid, jetpack-assisted ground pounds, or unloading enormous weapons into them. Saber Interactive's sequel to the 2011 cult favourite delights in its hyperviolence, the studio harnessing its experience creating *World War Z* to fill the screen with tyrannids. While the carnage remains central, the universe is brought to life through richly evocative backdrops, including a space station and a futuristic castle. Yet aside from a new parry system, we see little that deviates from long-established thirdperson shooter ideas, while a threeplayer cooperative mode seems to feature little player interaction. Still, there are times when mindless hack-and-slash hits the spot, particularly when it's executed with such grisly panache.



TO A T

Developer Uvula **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox Series **Release** TBA

Trust Keita Takahashi to take a sideways view of a familiar videogame bug and turn it into a feature. Indeed, the protagonist of his latest game has no choice but to take a sideways view, at least when entering rooms – since their arms are permanently extended in a T-pose. Naturally, that makes certain activities difficult, prompting minigames where you need to manoeuvre body parts to reach for objects, get washed and dressed, eat, drink and write. While there's an element of physical comedy, the overarching theme is embracing your uniqueness. Developed in conjunction with accessibility charity Able Gamers, it might show (as outlined in the catchy theme tune) that "the little things are hard", but it's intended as a positive tale of self-discovery, as our lead discovers that their unorthodox posture might, in fact, be "the perfect shape".



LITTLE KITTY, BIG CITY

Developer/publisher Double Dagger Studio **Format** PC, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

The cat might be the headliner, but our ears really prick up as we learn about the humans behind the scenes. Lead developer Matt T Wood worked at Valve during the Orange Box years, and we can't help but detect a little of that famous guiding-hand level design in how everything from signs' striping to sunbeams nudges us through its Tokyo-inspired city. Not that we need to follow its lead – with your moggy having got lost at the outset, the rest of the game is essentially a string of distractions encountered as they take the long way home.

Slinking through the urban environment, knocking plant pots off ledges, pausing for the occasional scratch, it's

impossible not to think of a certain other lost-cat game of recent years. Wood tells us he hasn't played *Stray*, though, and it certainly wasn't the inspiration for *Little Kitty's* creation. The game started life as a way of teaching his kids to code, before a video posted to Twitter caught fire and convinced him to wheel his chair out the door and set up his own studio. As he's telling us all this, though, our attention is batted away by what's happening on the screen. Even if you're not a dedicated cat lover, the Pixar-grade animation as this creature stretches and tumbles are enough to seize the heart, and leave no doubt about the *real* star of the show here.



MORTAL KOMBAT 1

Developer NetherRealm Studios **Publisher** Warner Bros Games **Format** PC, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series **Release** September 19

We may have become too hung up on the number. Surely three decades into a series' lifespan, sticking a '1' on the end is meant to suggest some major reboot, to lure in newcomers? But when we put this to series co-creator and *MK1* director **Ed Boon**, he seems genuinely surprised. "I didn't think about it that much – but that's a good point. Somebody coming to *Mortal Kombat 1* won't have to know all the events of the previous one, so they would be able to hop on board."

As that answer might suggest, from Boon's perspective this renumbering is all about the story – an idea we struggle to take too seriously, even with the series having gone all-in on glossy cinematics in its most recent instalments. *MK11*'s story ended with Liu Kang ascending to the status of fire god and resetting the universe. "So we've literally started with a big bang, with Lu Kang creating a new universe that he is hoping will turn out better than the previous one," Boon explains. "A perfect, peaceful garden of Eden." Which presumably goes well, given that immediately before this conversation we're shown a highlight reel of skewered heads, bifurcated torsos and splattered organs.

Yet even if *MK1* is not specifically designed to draw in players who've never committed a Fatality before – there is, for instance, no equivalent of

Street Fighter 6's Modern control scheme – this game is more immediately welcoming to newcomers than most in its genre. Its inputs seem more forgiving and, with minimal tuition, we're soon pulling off outrageous moves that, in other fighting games, would put the flexibility of our fingers to the test. *Mortal Kombat* is interested in breaking its characters' bones, not yours.

A single input allows blind swordsman Kenshi

to summon a shimmering spirit double that fights alongside him, a new ability that, the first time we come up against it, feels well and truly OP. Getting caught between the two Kenshis is a meat grinder, and as soon our opponent (another *MK* rookie) is done turning our character into a sword-mounted doner, we demand a rematch. The answer turns out to be Kombo Breakers, which

make their return here after taking *MK11* off, and effective use of Kameos, a new system that allows you to pick a second fighter and summon them for one-off moves, which can be combo'd seamlessly into your own. There are powerful synergies to be found here, and Boon acknowledges that making sure no single pairing is outright better than the rest has required "testing like you wouldn't believe". This system raises the game's skill ceiling higher than ever before – not what you might expect from a 'first' instalment, but welcome nonetheless.

Making sure no single pairing is outright better than the rest required "testing like you wouldn't believe"

MULTIFORMAT



LORELEI AND THE LASER EYES

Developer Simogo **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Switch **Release** 2024

If *Flock* gave us the whole nine yards, this oblique update advanced our understanding of Simogo's next game by inches. A voiceover makes clear it's a game about "interpreting patterns and solving puzzles"; given the self-referential theme, we wonder if one of the dates mentioned in the trailer alludes to a past project: 2014 was the year of *The Sailor's Dream*. Expect more next issue.



ASGARD'S WRATH 2

Developer Sanzaru Games **Publisher** Oculus Studios
Format Quest **Release** Winter

The lineup of games that accompany Meta's Quest 3 reveal might not thrill as much as hoped, but that makes it easy to spot the crown jewel. The original *Asgard's Wrath* was an ambitious action RPG that made Zuckerberg dig his wallet out and buy the studio. This sequel, then, is a firstparty effort where you battle gods and monsters of mythology – what model could Meta possibly be looking to there?



PAYDAY 3

Dev Overkill Software, Starbreeze Studios **Pub** Prime Matter
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series **Release** September 21

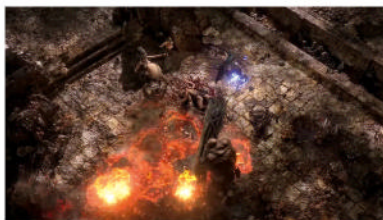
Just when they thought they were out... having apparently renounced their life of crime (albeit after stealing presidential pardons), the bank robbers return with a pair of new recruits to pull off heists. They'll have to work out how to cope with increased surveillance and more diligent security guards – though a plot that appears to feature cryptocurrency risks becoming quickly outdated.



SUSHI BEN

Developer/publisher Big Brane Studios
Format PC VR, PSVR2, Quest **Release** 2023

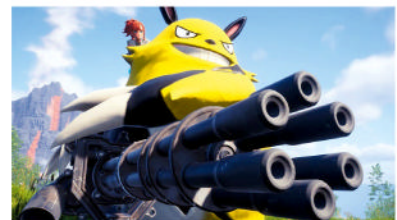
Manga-inspired art styles are hardly new to games, but Big Brane Studios goes one step further than cel-shaded characters, overlaying *Sushi Ben*'s world with animated panels that blend 2D and 3D art. They're illustrating a slice-of-life tale that combines all the classics: fishing, table tennis, archery, cooking sushi and hunting ghosts. Which counts as day-to-day life, it seems, if you're a manga character.



PATH OF EXILE II

Developer/publisher Grinding Gear Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2024

Landing two days after the launch of *Diablo IV*, the release of a new trailer for Grinding Gear Games' sequel had a Crocodile Dundee energy to it – as if to say, "That's not an ARPG. *That's* an ARPG". This followup offers a visual and mechanical overhaul of the original game, but doesn't supplant it: unlike a certain Blizzard sequel we could mention, existing characters and microtransactions will carry over.



PALWORLD

Developer/publisher Pocketpair
Format PC, Xbox **Release** January

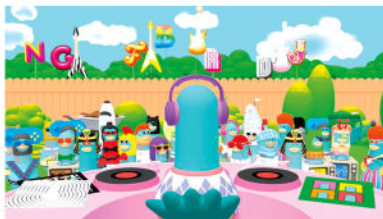
It's a shock to hear the words leave Geoff Keighley's mouth: "*Pokémon*, with guns". *Palworld* might be a one-joke wonder, but if it's going to be funny anywhere it's in this theatre, where brand hygiene is as carefully controlled as the air conditioning. Between creature designs that seem to be baiting Nintendo's lawyers and the sight of sheep manning machine-gun turrets, it's impossible not to smile.



BOUNTY STAR

Developer Dinogod **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2024

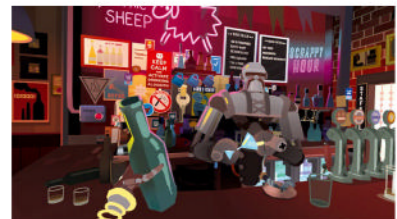
Typical: you wait years for a game in which you pilot a mech and grow crops, and then two come along (almost) at once. Dinogod's sci-fi western casts you as a war vet trying to rebuild her life in the American Southwest. Unlike *Lightyear Frontier*, there's a divide between action and agriculture: though the food you grow can boost stats, your customisable mech is used to harm, not farm.



HEADBANGERS: RHYTHM ROYALE

Dev Glee-Cheese Studio **Pub** Team17 **Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series **Release** 2023

The battle royale template has proved malleable enough to fit a string of genres, from shooters to knockabout gameshows. The second game from *A Musical Story* developer Glee-Cheese could hardly be a more different take on rhythm-action to that psychedelic road trip: as one of 30 pigeons, you'll match beats, identify instruments and play follow-the-leader as you seek to be the last bird standing.



RETROPOLIS 2

Developer/publisher Peanut Button
Format PC VR, Quest **Release** TBA

The spirit of Lucasarts is alive and well in VR. The *Retropolis* games are essentially firstperson point-and-clicks, as your robot detective interacts using their Inspector Gadget-style 'extend-o-arm', but it's the hand-painted setting that catches our eye: film noir meets art deco, in a city of automaton dames and gangsters. Released episodically, a preview of the first is available now on Quest's App Lab.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



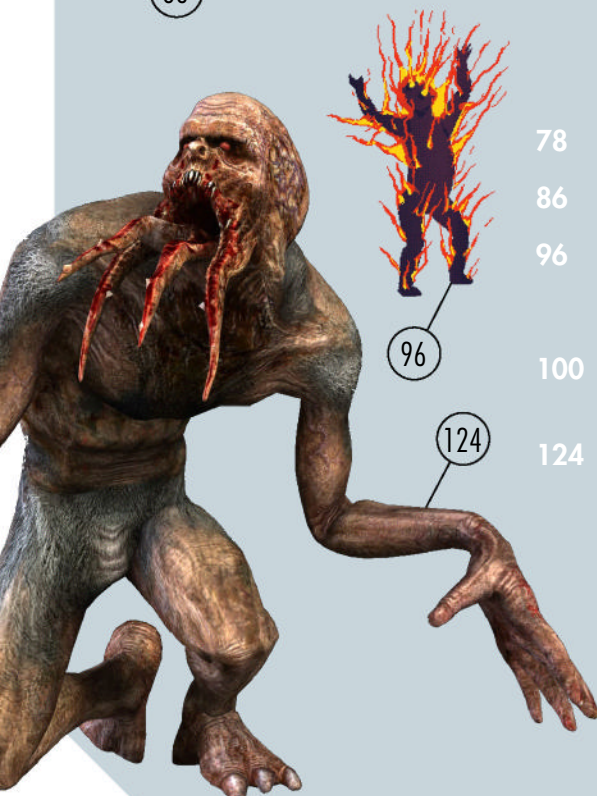
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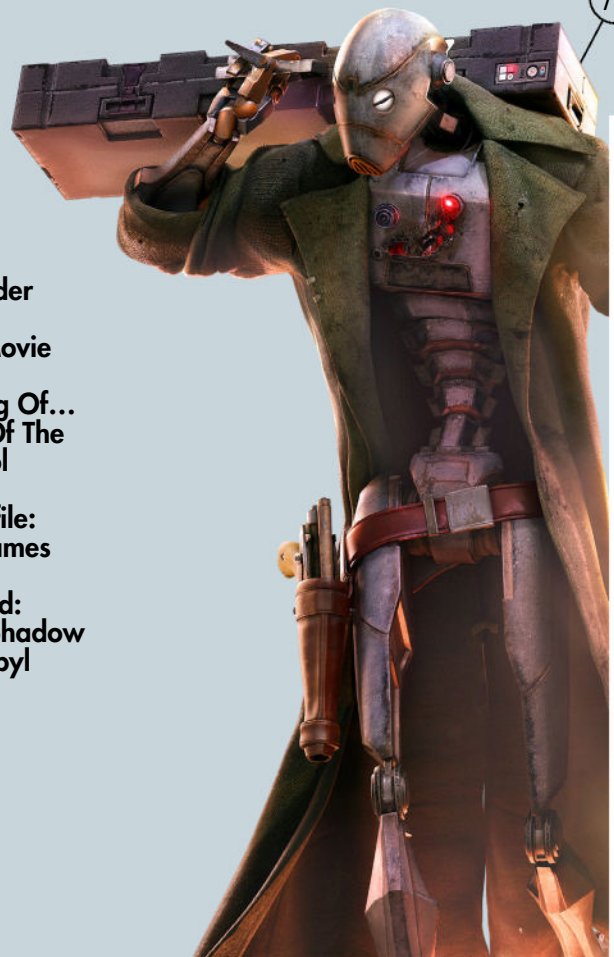
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Just as vital as getting the character of Kay Vess right, Julian Gerighty says, was nailing her supporting cast. ND-5 and Nix were conceived to reflect different parts of Vess' personality

GUIN

As Ubisoft makes its big Star Wars debut, Massive makes the bold decision to go small

By ALEX SPENCER

DETER

Game Star Wars: Outlaws
Developer Massive Entertainment
Publisher Ubisoft, Lucasfilm Games
Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Release TBA

NEW HOPES

In order to develop both this game and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* side by side, Massive has divided itself into "two very separate teams", Gerighty explains. Both games are, of course, a step away from Massive's previous work – "after eight years of *The Division*, the core team felt like it was time for us to stretch our muscles in another direction," he tells us – but we're surprised to hear, given how ambitious *Outlaws* seems, that the latter is actually the "slightly larger team within Massive". Though, of course, given the way Ubisoft operates, that doesn't tell the full story. There are nine other studios credited on *Outlaws*, from Bucharest to Shanghai, and Gerighty admits even he doesn't know the total number of people working on it across the world.



KA

s the unmistakable roar of TIE fighters tears through LA's Novo Theater, the crowd responds with equal volume.

Our feelings about overenthusiastic attendees at these things have been made clear – doubly so when the entire presentation, as with the Xbox showcase we're here to watch, has been prerecorded. And yet all that cynicism melts away for a moment as we're transported back to all the other dark, tightly packed rooms we've shared with people whooping at space battles up on the big screen.

Besides, in a June that's otherwise low on the unexpected, this manages to feel like a surprise attack. No small feat, given we've known this game was coming since 2021, when Lucasfilm announced it was bringing EA's exclusive Star Wars licence to an end and working with Ubisoft's Massive Entertainment. At that time, though, we might have imagined something akin to the Swedish studio's *Division* games: a loot-heavy co-op shooter with the military hardware swapped out for blasters, the Washington Monument for a moisture vaporator.

Instead, we begin out in space, as a Rebel blockade runner crashes into the prow of an inbound star destroyer – a neat inversion of A New Hope's opening moments, and a way of establishing the relative fortunes of the Empire and Rebellion at the point *Outlaws* is set, between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*. Not that this wider picture much concerns our protagonist, who is introduced in a scummy Outer Rim cantina, cheating at the intergalactic equivalent of poker. Kay Vess, you have to suspect, is not much of a joiner.

"Scoundrel" is the word that recurs in our conversation with creative director **Julian Gerighty** – the seed, he tells us, of the entire project. It was this untapped fantasy that Massive first took to Lucasfilm in February 2020, capitalising on the contacts it had made via its other ongoing project, *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* (that movie series joined Star Wars in the Disney stable with 2019's Fox acquisition).

That conversation followed hot on the heels of the release of EA's *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, which might partly explain why Ubisoft's team wanted to go in the opposite direction, Jedi, we recently posited, are practically machine-tooled to be the perfect videogame power-fantasy

avatar, but we have played a lot of them through the years, along with a fair few ace pilots, the odd rank-and-file soldier, even a couple of more straightforward toughs. Someone who gets by on their wits is more novel, and *Andor* has recently demonstrated the power of a version of this galaxy where laser swords don't rule the roost. All of which helps to offset Ubisoft announcing "the first-ever open-world Star Wars game" with a gameplay reveal set on a dusty planet, scant months after *Jedi: Survivor* let us wander the deserts and crags of Koboh on our Nekko mount.

There are many good reasons to go with a more vulnerable, roguish player-character, then. But, as Gerighty tells it, the decision wasn't quite so tactical. "It was super-selfish," he says. "It was the fantasy I connected with most in the original trilogy – as a kid, I was a much, much bigger fan of Han Solo and Chewbacca than any of the others." The man himself appears in *Outlaws'* reveal trailer, frozen in carbonite (a novel way of getting a Solo cameo in the game, perhaps, without having to wrangle Harrison Ford), but Vess seems to share at the very least a tailor with Star Wars' archetypal scoundrel.

Yet it was important to Massive that Vess be more than just an archetype. "When you think of a scoundrel, your mind goes to Han Solo, it goes to Lando, it goes to Indiana Jones, to James Bond, to Captain Jack Sparrow," Gerighty says. Those were all inspirations here, but Massive needed to find a fresh niche. Its answer was someone "a little bit more relatable," he explains. "More of a rookie, a petty thief, who ends up in a situation that's much bigger than they ever expected. This little fish in a colossal pond, dealing with sharks and barracudas."

The "last puzzle piece" in defining this character, he says, was her casting. Humberly González is a Venezuelan-Canadian actor last seen on TV screens in Netflix's *Ginny & Georgia*, and in videogames as Mercedes 'Jonrón' Martin in *Far Cry 6* (with which *Outlaws* shares a narrative director, Navid Khavari). It's an important piece of representation that's been all too rare in Star Wars to date, but she also brings to Vess an immediate, distinct charisma – frankly, we warm to her more over the course of two trailers than we have to Cal Kestis over the passage of two whole games.

"Her sense of humour, her willingness to show vulnerability, and insecurity, but with a ▶

“IT WAS SUPER-SELFISH. AS A KID, I WAS A MUCH, MUCH BIGGER FAN OF HAN SOLO AND CHEWBACCA THAN ANY OF THE OTHERS”



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Playing stealthily won't be mandatory, apparently, but the fact that your primary weapon is a simple blaster seems to encourage it

“WE’RE REALLY FOCUSING ON WHAT
‘OPEN WORLD’ MEANS TO THE PLAYER,
WHICH IS FULL FREEDOM OF APPROACH”



Massive chose to set its game in the galaxy's Outer Rim, where the criminal syndicates have more sway than the Empire. Putting Vess somewhere far from major galactic events should help solve the side-story problem that plagues many Star Wars tie-ins



lot of confidence within certain scenes,” Gerighty says when we ask what González has brought to the role. “Let’s say Kay is tangling with the Hutts — picture a scene with one of the most famous Hutts out there,” he adds, the wink almost audible. “And she’s holding her own, despite being a petty thief. And communicating the subtlety of this false confidence, Humberly brings a huge amount of that — something that doesn’t necessarily appear on a page or on a script when you read it.”

Vulnerability, in fact, is a core part of *Outlaws’* design. That’s apparent in the in-game walkthrough we’re shown, a few hours after that first surprise attack at the Xbox showcase, as Vess launches one of her own: sneaking up on a guard and tapping them on the shoulder before delivering a right hook. (There’s more than a touch of Indiana Jones to the way she shakes off the pain in her fist afterwards.) She crouches to sneak, hides behind cover and uses distractions, gadgets and environmental workarounds to dodge further combat. If the Ubisoft model we’d expected in advance was *The Division*, this looks closer to *Watch Dogs* or perhaps even — whisper it — *Splinter Cell*.

As you might have gathered, this is the very same footage later broadcast to the world during Ubisoft Forward. A demo in the classic E3 mould, carefully choreographed down to the tiniest input, and no doubt showing the game at its very best. When we put this to Gerighty, though, he pushes back: “I don’t think it’s any more crafted than another gameplay beat or quest we could have within the game.”

This is encouraging, not least because there are several moments during the walkthrough that catch our attention precisely because they suggest things could have gone differently. Gerighty backs this up, saying that it would have been perfectly valid to not sneak through the area but instead rush straight into combat, or else to stay in stealth mode all the way to where Vess’ speeder bike is parked up outside, never getting into a fight at all. “We’re really focusing on what ‘open world’ means to the player, which is full freedom of approach.”

This is highlighted in a later scene, when Vess encounters an Imperial officer slumming it down in the Outer Rim and is presented, in classic *Mass Effect* fashion, with a decision: whether or not to pay her off. In the version we’re shown, Vess chooses violence, leading to a demo-friendly chase sequence that ends up in an unexpected place. But what if things had gone the other way? “If you chose to bribe, you wouldn’t have got the 2,500 credits, you’d have got a fraction of that — but you wouldn’t have been chased by the Empire. So you’ve bought your safety, in a way, for a period of time.”

This is the kind of crunchy risk-reward we associate more with a good Roguelike than a streamlined blockbuster. But presumably that must mean there’s a related cost if the chase doesn’t go your way? Gerighty won’t get into details just yet. “But I can say that those choices, the way that we use them most is within the reputation system.” This links to the game’s factions — criminal syndicates which can take a liking or disliking to Vess depending on your actions. “If you’re in their good books, you’ll unlock exclusive quests, special prices at their vendors, access to locked-off areas. But if you’re in their bad books, they’re going to send people to chase you down — and there’ll be consequences in terms of credits, or some sort of monetary punishment, there.”

Even after opting to pocket the bribe money for yourself, Gerighty points out, that chase sequence needn’t have played out the way it did. “If you wanted to deal with it on the moon’s surface, you could have done that.” But instead Vess flees to her waiting ship, the Trailblazer, and brings us back to where we started: out in the blackness of space.

We’re reminded of another surprise-attack moment, in that first *No Man’s Sky* reveal, as the Trailblazer pushes up through the atmosphere and into orbit, the player apparently retaining control throughout. Yet the clouds of the planet’s upper atmosphere here suggest a hidden transition, and Gerighty cautions that we will not have total free rein. “In our past games, we didn’t have vehicles, so in wrapping our heads around the different gameplay possibilities of speeders and spaceships, we’ve had to embrace the limitations and constraints of each one.” Unlike in *No Man’s Sky* or *Outer Wilds*, then, you can’t put down anywhere on the planet; rather, you choose from set landing and take-off points. “Flying [freely] above the planet was something that we chose not to do, because it was going to take us a huge amount of effort for very little payoff.”

What you get instead is the ability to freely explore space. At least, Gerighty explains, within the near-orbit of each planet or moon: “that’s the open-world space region you’ll be investigating.” Floating around Toshara, the setting for this demo, are loose flocks of asteroids and the shattered ruins of some hulking space station. “We’re trying to create not only reasons for you to trade and smuggle, and fight against pirates, and against the Empire, but also to explore.”

Vess isn’t here to have a nose around, though. And right on cue, here come the TIE fighters. Massive might not have worked with vehicles before — let alone ones able to move through an extra axis — but the resulting dogfight certainly looks convincing. Perhaps it’s the

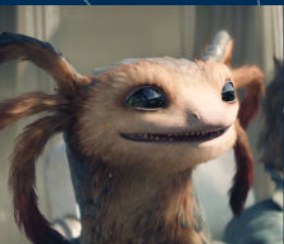
GANG MENTALITY

Outlaws’ faction reputation system sounds like it will bring some all-important dynamism to the world. But how, we ask, might a player put their finger on the scales? “You can take contracts, small missions, from a faction to get into their good graces. If you are caught in their territory without their permission, that’s gonna affect it adversely. If you’re seen getting rid of faction members, that’s going to cost you as well. So there’s lots of little levers that can be pulled over your adventure, and even the main quest — the golden path, if you will — has decisions you’re going to have to make, about who you’re actually siding with in those quests.”



NIXED IT

"The last day of mocap with the puppet master, she cried, because it was like saying goodbye to a favourite pet," Gerighty says of *Outlaws'* alien companion. But while he acknowledges Nix's narrative potential and "soft values", what really interests Gerighty are the hard mechanical implications. "In gameplay terms, it allows Kay to have a little bit of those superpowers," he says. You can direct Nix to attack enemies, activate out-of-reach buttons, cause distractions and even pick up heavy weapons from fallen foes for you to use. He's like a cross, then, between *Watch Dogs'* spiderbot, *BioShock Infinite's* Elizabeth and, yes, BD-1 from EA's *Jedi* games. Indeed, Nix helps to close the gap between the roguish Vess and that series' increasingly powerful lightsaber wielder.



surroundings putting us in mind of *Star Fox 64's* more celestial environments (at least, as they existed in our younger imaginations), but there seems a similar arcade-like quality to the space battles here. The Trailblazer is equipped with a limited supply of missiles to supplement its lasers, a nitrous-style speed boost, and a hyperdrive. Which is how Vess makes her final escape: after a long, vulnerable moment while the engines warm up, the ship punches through into that familiar, brilliant blue subspace.

Hyperspace is how you travel between each of the game's planets. We don't yet know the specifics of every single region, although Gerighty confirms that the icy environment seen in the trailer is Kijimi from *The Rise Of Skywalker*. (Don't hold that against it, though — the planet's visual design was one of the movie's saving graces.) Elsewhere we glimpse a forested savannah, a cyberpunk-infused undercity, Imperial bases, and a desert locale that's a dead ringer for Tatooine. The differences, Gerighty promises, will be more than just aesthetic: "We're trying to adapt the type of player experience between each planet or moon that you go to." The Empire's presence will vary from planet to planet, and while some regions will be focused on dense urban environments, others will be more sparsely populated, with the odd settlement but plenty of opportunities to really let rip on Vess' speeder bike.

In fact, Gerighty says, this bike might be the best metric for defining the size of each world. Each planet was designed to be big enough that traversing it felt like a journey, even on a vehicle that is quite famously fast-moving. Or, looked at another way: "It's a crude analogy, but the size of one planet might be about [equivalent to] two of the zones in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, for example. It could be two to three zones. But it's not, you know, this sort of epic 'the whole of England recreated' approach."

That means they're of a "manageable" size, he says, for both player and developer. Perhaps because of a certain other open-world space game shown off in LA this June, Gerighty repeatedly emphasises that *Outlaws'* locations are all "handcrafted": "We haven't procedurally generated an entire planet," he says. For all the space that Massive has to play with, Gerighty wants us to know that what really interests the studio are the details.

Even if you think you're a huge *Star Wars* fan, Gerighty says, working on it teaches you that "100 per cent, you don't know *Star Wars*" — at least, in terms of how that universe is built. "You can't understand the constraints, the design philosophies and principles that go into creating something like a new gadget, or a pistol, or a creature. That's something we've had to learn."

There's the obvious stuff, he says: "Having that sort of patina of use, of wear and tear, to make it feel like it's lived-in." But what really defines *Star Wars'* visual language is "a process of reduction," he says. "There's this design lens that you apply, where everything has to be reduced to its essential properties. Take the ships, for example. A TIE fighter, it's a circle and two lines — you draw that, and you can immediately recognise it. The Millennium Falcon, the legend goes that it was inspired by a burger and side of fries. I have no idea whether that's true, but again it's a very simple shape. The same thing goes for our ship, the Trailblazer — it's inspired by some toys of the 1970s, but made very, very simple."

This doesn't just apply to the big-ticket items, either. "I can even come down to something as granular as the industrial design of Kay's binoculars. There's a shape language there that is inspired by the '70s or '80s but is fundamentally almost timeless." The influence of those decades comes up repeatedly in our conversation, but even if Gerighty had never said it, it's right there in the footage. Note the blown-out waves of Vess' hair, and the VHS quality of the text popups announcing each location.

"Our game is set between Empire and Jedi, so we wanted to emulate that feel," Gerighty explains. Again, this goes down to the smallest details: Massive has been developing technology "which emulates some of the lenses of the 1970s," he explains. "So you have the vignetting, film grain, lens breathing, the curvature of a thicker lens, the slight lens flares — all of these things that are very subtle, but come together to give you a more cinematic experience."

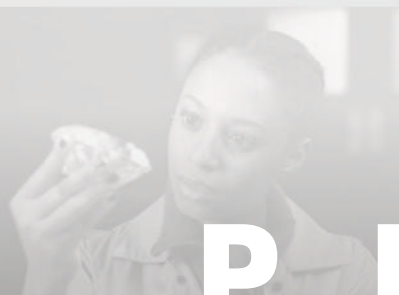
And if you've been thinking that Vess' alien companion, Nix, resembles a Jim Henson creation, well, that's no coincidence. "There are so many practical effects in those movies that are phenomenal," Gerighty says. Nix's mocap was recorded using a puppet, and his in-game model is designed to match, utilising shaders specifically created to "represent a sort of latex material".

This is a very specific vision of *Star Wars*, then: one clearly born of the formative cinema experiences of its makers, but bringing those personal experiences and tastes to bear. Take for one final example ND-5, the third member of Vess' crew. It's an existing BX droid design lifted from the prequels, but with a trenchcoat thrown over its shoulders. Just enough to make ND feel distinct — and to get the Internet afroth. This is *Outlaws'* mission statement, it seems, in a nutshell. Sticking within the established parameters while finding fresh territory among all the films, TV series and, vitally, videogames that have been here before. Or, as Gerighty sums up, "to make sure that everything feels like it belongs in *this* galaxy, as well as *their* galaxy." ■

IF YOU'VE BEEN THINKING THAT VESS' ALIEN COMPANION, NIX, RESEMBLES A JIM HENSON CREATION, WELL, THAT'S NO COINCIDENCE



MAIN Vess' speeder bike is inspired by motocross, and that comes across in its jumping and drifting manoeuvres, and the way it banks around corners. LEFT After the character-creator-sliders-to-middle design of Cal Kestis, Humberto González as Kay Vess is a breath of fresh air



PLAY THE



M O V I E



As the interactive film sector gathers pace, we talk to some of the directors and developers leading the charge

By **LEWIS PACKWOOD**



1+2 Richard Pring and David Banner, co-founders of Wales Interactive.
3 Grace Chadwick and Harry Chadwick, co-founders, Interflix Media.
4 Harry asserts that interactive films offer an exciting opportunity for his native industry. "We're just hoping that more filmmakers see this type of genre and move over."
5 The Isle Tide Hotel has a branching narrative as you investigate a cult.
6 Grace says the future of interactive films involves "elevating the genre... to stand up against traditional films, or stand up against traditional games, and make sure that it's a winning genre in both fields"

THE ISLE TIDE HOTEL

The latest in a long line of interactive movies published by Wales Interactive, The Isle Tide Hotel has been created by Interflix Media, a company set up by Grace and Harry Chadwick in 2021, who previously worked in VR films. It tells the story of a father who must rescue his teenage daughter from a cult, and offers seven different endings, although some paths are locked behind narrative puzzles.



The very first issue of **Edge**, way back in 1993, featured a prescient quote from Mark Lewis, then vice president of Electronic Arts. "I foresee a day when you go to a movie theatre, there's about 300 people there, and between you, you all play the movie," he said. "From your seats, you control what happens."

Thirty years later, we're watching almost exactly this scenario play out at a cinema in London. There might not be quite as many as 300 people at this screening of *The Gallery*, the new interactive film from director **Paul Raschid**, but we're collectively playing the movie, making key choices and deciding how the film ends.

After years of promises, hype and disappointment, it feels like the interactive film movement is finally gaining ground. Over the past few years we've seen a number of interactive TV shows produced by Netflix, starting with Charlie Brooker's groundbreaking *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2018, which has been followed by nearly two dozen interactive shows and cartoons, most tying into existing properties, including *Puss in Boots*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Boss Baby*. Perhaps most improbable of all is *Bear Grylls' You Vs Wild*, in which you make decisions that will decide whether or not the survivalist... well, survives. At the same time, studios such as Wales Interactive and Flavourworks have wholeheartedly embraced the genre, developing new tools for creating interactive films, as well as pioneering new forms of interaction.

Getting to this point, though, has been a struggle. Part of the reason why interactive movies have taken so long to get off the ground is technical: the ability to store and quickly access huge, high-fidelity video files has only really become feasible in the past decade or so. But interactive films also face something of an identity crisis, positioned as they are uncomfortably between the realms of movies and videogames, being neither and both at the same time. Too 'gamey' for traditional film-industry executives to consider; perhaps not enough for traditional videogame audiences. Even defining what they are is a challenge.

So, what exactly constitutes an interactive film? And how is it different from an FMV (full-motion video) game? Are they, in fact, the same thing? **Richard Pring**, co-founder of Wales Interactive, argues that anything where the viewer makes choices to guide the story is an interactive film. But anything that involves more complex, perhaps nonlinear gameplay, such as Sam Barlow's *Her Story*, is an FMV game. Simply put, he says, "FMV is a game-film, whereas an interactive movie is a film-game." Then again, Wales Interactive's other co-founder, **David Banner**, chips in, the publisher often still refers to its

projects as FMV games, simply because it's a well-known term in the videogame industry and as such is useful for marketing.

Wales Interactive has a lot of skin in the interactive movie game. The South Glamorgan-based company got in early on the current wave of interest in FMV games with the release of *The Bunker* in 2016, and since then it has published over a dozen interactive movies, including *The Complex*, *Five Dates*, *Night Book*, *Who Pressed Mute On Uncle Marcus?* and *Bloodshore*, with current project *The Isle Tide Hotel* set to be released later this year.

The *Bunker* came about after the pair bumped into Simon Sparks, the project's producer, at a videogame event aftershow party, and he told them that no other publisher would even entertain the idea of making an interactive film. After taking a chance, it paid off – and so Wales Interactive partnered with Swiss production company CtrlMovie to publish 2017 heist thriller *Late Shift*. Since then, Banner says, the pair have been actively looking for other people making interactive movies. But they've gone one further than that.

"It was a case where we just couldn't find enough people making these on their own," Pring says – so they came up with a way to make them in-house, by developing an interactive scripting tool called **WIST**. The project's goal was to help writers and directors from a traditional, linear filmmaking background to easily switch to making interactive movies, which can be intimidating, complicated beasts, especially for people who aren't used to game development. **WIST** provides a simple, visual

way to represent all of the branching decision points in a script, and the digital file forms the basis of the final product.

Wales Interactive has been actively seeking out talent from the film industry to make its interactive films. Paul Raschid was brought in to direct *The Complex* in 2019, despite having no experience of the game industry: his background was entirely in traditional films. But now he is fully devoted to interactive movies, and went on to direct *Five Dates* and *Ten Dates* for Wales Interactive before releasing *The Gallery* – the film which brings us to this London cinema – through his own production company, **Aviary Films**, which he runs with his father.

Wales Interactive's latest project, *The Isle Tide Hotel*, is another family affair, created by brother-and-sister partnership **Harry** and **Grace Chadwick**. They began by making film shorts, but moved into creating 360-degree movies for VR in 2018, then formed **Interflux Media** in 2021 to explore making interactive material, including adverts for the likes of Gordon's gin. Grace says that one reason filmmakers are moving into this space is that the traditional film industry is struggling – especially the UK independent film sector, which ►

THIRTY YEARS LATER, WE'RE WATCHING ALMOST EXACTLY THIS SCENARIO PLAY OUT

the British Film Institute said in a 2022 report was “inhibited to the point of market failure” by rising production costs, declining revenues and greater competition.

Moving into interactive film not only raises the prospect of much-needed funding from the relatively buoyant game industry, it also potentially lets filmmakers target two audiences at once: game players and filmgoers. “If you can open up both markets, both audiences, and bring the two genres together, you’re capturing that winning combination,” Grace says.

In addition, the videogame industry tends to be more receptive, says **Zachary Slatter**, CEO of Flavourworks, the studio behind 2019 interactive thriller *Erica*. “My experience of working in both the film industry and the game industry is that there’s a lot more appetite for innovation and creative testing in the game industry,” he says. “I think the film industry is probably slower to adopt some of these opportunities around new forms of storytelling.”

Paul Raschid has had similar experiences: “You’re going to film people, and you’re saying it’s an interactive film, they’re like, ‘Oh, what is that?’” He points out – as do most of the people interviewed here – that *Bandersnatch* was a huge breakthrough for the interactive film sector, providing a recognisable touchstone that was seen, or at least heard of, by a mainstream audience.

Instead of having to explain what an interactive film is to people who may have barely even touched a game, now Raschid and others like him can simply say, “It’s like *Bandersnatch*”.

Before that moment, Pring adds, whenever he and Banner spoke to film and TV people and mentioned games, they would “automatically” think they were aimed at children. *Bandersnatch* finally demonstrated to the TV industry that it’s possible to make adult-oriented interactive stories. “I mean, we all know this anyway,” Pring says. “But when talking to certain aspects of the entertainment industry, for some reason they’ve just got it in their head that games are for kids.”

Then again, even though he praises the show’s production, Banner is highly critical of the technical underpinnings of *Bandersnatch*. He recalls visiting Netflix with Pring in 2019 in an attempt to sign *Bandersnatch* for release by Wales Interactive. “We basically told them it’s bad game design,” he says. “You go down a cul-de-sac, they tell you you’re wrong, and then you reverse again.” By contrast, he says, “something like *Late Shift* is far superior in the amount of different edits, different endings, the complexity of it. It’s far more sophisticated, on a much smaller budget.”

The main difference is that WIST gives interactive films memory. Your choices are remembered, and the ways you react in each situation affect how other characters react to you later on. Banner gives the example of an option where the

protagonist can attempt to go in for a kiss. If the player’s earlier choices have been mostly positive throughout, the object of their affection might reciprocate the kiss. But if they’ve been mostly negative, he says, “We’ll play the edit where she goes, ‘What the hell are you doing?’”

This isn’t the only example of interactive films’ evolution beyond binary choices. Flavourworks has developed an engine called TouchVideo, which seamlessly blends video with game mechanics, allowing players to manually open boxes, pull a ribbon, push down a syringe – or even pull focus to highlight different planes of view. It’s combined with the proprietary CookBook authoring tool, which allows users to script and assemble interactive films using a drag-and-drop interface.

One thing Flavourworks has been considering is the number of different path choices needed in an interactive film. Slatter says that, whereas *Erica* was broadly branching, for Flavourworks’ latest game, *Cuttlefish*, the studio has narrowed down the number of choices to promote engagement with the tactile gameplay. “You don’t necessarily need lots of branching to make a good interactive movie,” Slatter says.

Immersive theatre company Swamp Motel has taken this to the extreme and abandoned branching altogether for its

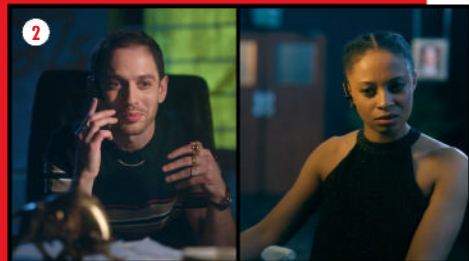
experimental interactive short *The Alter*. The ten-minute movie follows a group of friends at a remote country house, and combines two video feeds: one shot during a party the night before, and one the morning after. Viewers can switch between the feeds to

see the same space at a different time point, recalling *Dishonored 2*’s Crack In The Slab mission and *Titanfall 2*’s Effect And Cause.

“We create live immersive experiences, normally,” Swamp Motel co-founder **Clem Garritty** says, “and then the pandemic happened, and threw us into: ‘What the hell do we do?’” The answer was to move online. Swamp Motel created *Isklander*, a three-part escape experience for teams (previously discussed in **E362**) which Garritty says opened up its audience far beyond what it’d reached before. When Swamp Motel returned to creating live immersive experiences after the lockdowns had lifted, the company was determined to continue creating digital interactive experiences alongside its usual line of work. “It was a complete necessity to begin with,” Garritty says, “but it’s now become this thing that feels like a big, core part of who Swamp Motel are.”

In that sense, *The Alter* is like Swamp Motel’s statement of intent: a calling card to show clients who might want to fund the company to make longer interactive films. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the company’s go-to reference when making it, Garritty tells us, was *Bandersnatch*. While his ►

“YOU DON’T NEED
LOTS OF BRANCHING
TO MAKE A GOOD
INTERACTIVE MOVIE”



CUTTLEFISH

Cuttlefish tells the story of a heist caper in which one of your criminal associates has turned on their former crew. Coming from Flavourworks, the studio best known for 2019 psycho-thriller *Erica*, it features the company's proprietary TouchVideo technology, which allows you to manipulate objects within the video, such as boxes, locks and paper.

1 Flavourworks' TouchVideo engine lets players interact with objects such as keypads.

2 Flavourworks has positioned *Cuttlefish* as an interactive film, but Slatter notes that the term FMV can be useful as a keyword or in marketing, though "FMV doesn't really mean anything" to a Generation Z audience.

3 Slatter aims to create experiences with a lower barrier to entry than traditional videogames. "Console games can be quite intimidating," he says.

4 Zachary Slatter, CEO, Flavourworks.

5 Flavourworks puts an emphasis on "the seamless switching of video"





THE ALTER

Immersive theatre company Swamp Motel shot *The Alter* over a single exhausting weekend, essentially filming two short movies back to back. One video feed depicts a late-night party in an isolated house, while the other feed shows the morning after, as the remaining partygoers try to piece together exactly what happened to the other guests.



1 Garritty says that whereas static camera shots would have been fine for a film, he aimed to keep the camera moving as much as possible for *The Alter*. "It heightened everything a lot more, and it made that interactivity all the more thrilling."

2 There's more to these sheep than meets the eye.

3 Garritty says that showing *The Alter* to its clients has led to some corporate work for Swamp Motel, but the company is also having internal conversations about creating a new, "very different" interactive short.

4+5 Clem Garritty and Ollie Jones, co-founders of Swamp Motel



creative partner, co-founder **Ollie Jones**, is a dedicated videogame enthusiast, "I have never played a game in my life," Garritty says. "And for people like me, I think *Bandersnatch* was quite a good bridging exercise – like, here's a very simple game mechanic you can get behind, but with a big filmic bow on top of it."

For *The Alter*, Swamp Motel's creative technologist worked out a way to toggle between different video feeds playing simultaneously, and that mechanic led to the concept for the short. "It felt much more like a filmmaker project rather than a gaming project," Jones says. "It's about making those mechanics very accessible." He notes that they wanted to avoid the pauses of something like *Bandersnatch*, where the film stops to let you make a decision. *The Alter*, by contrast, flows smoothly onwards at all times, seamlessly flicking between feeds at the touch of a button. "It keeps the pace going, which is really important in both films and games."

Someone else who is considering just how much interactivity is really required in interactive films is **Tim Follin**, the founder of UK studio Baggy Cat Entertainment who was famous in another era for his astonishing 8- and 16bit chiptunes. He got in early on the current FMV renaissance, releasing *Contradiction: Spot The Liar* in 2015, a murder-mystery adventure in which players explore a village and watch videos of suspects to point out holes in their alibis. He followed it up with the interactive horror experience *At Dead Of Night* in 2020, blending live action and graphics, which surged in popularity after it was picked up by several YouTubers.

Whereas *Contradiction* is mostly linear, *At Dead Of Night* offers several potential plotlines to follow as you try to evade the malevolent Jimmy. "At the midpoint in the game, you could be playing three stories at once, basically," Follin says. "I originally wrote it as one long, linear story, and I think all that happened was that people got confused by it. So I'm actually ditching that idea for the next one – I'm just gonna have a straight, linear story again, because it's kind of irrelevant to the experience. I don't know what's gained from it."

"I'm trying to create a game where you have physical freedom, and the story should be the one element that is a completely linear process," he continues. "But everything else is nonlinear, so you can move wherever you want: the process of getting chased around this building is going to be completely nonlinear." But if people just want a linear story, why not just make a regular film, we ask? "I'm a hair away from doing that!" Follin laughs.

He actually did briefly consider making *Contradiction* as a film rather than a game during its production. But ultimately he

had a tiny budget and reasoned that the audience would be more forgiving of that in a game format. "What you're trying to do is get people to believe in the thing that you're presenting to them, and having an element of interactivity seems to massively help with that," he says. "They'll forgive all kinds of things that, if you saw any of those things in a feature film you'd paid to go and see, I don't think you would." He chuckles self-effacingly. "If I re-edited *Contradiction* into a film, I honestly don't think anyone would pay to watch that!"

So if you're trying to target an audience of both players and viewers, so to speak, how do you best reach them? In other words: where should interactive films *live*? "I think for something like *The Alter*, its home is on Netflix or Prime Video, one of the big streamers that can house the tech required," Jones says. But technology really is the sticking point here. *The Alter* is currently hosted on a bespoke player on Swamp Motel's website; getting it to work on Prime Video, for example, would require the streamer to develop and roll out specific technology to make it happen. Netflix hasn't disclosed how much it cost to develop and implement the story-branching technology that underpins *Bandersnatch* and its subsequent interactive shows, but presumably it wasn't cheap – which

might be one reason it's the only major streaming service to offer such things.

Flavourworks' Slatter says that finding a way to get interactive films onto televisions is essential for targeting the more casual audience. "For us, delivering interactive

experiences into the set-top box or connected TV, as well as the tablets, is priority number one." He's currently in talks with videogame publishers about transposing certain game series into interactive film experiences, opening them up to a wider audience beyond their traditional boundaries, and riding the recent trend of successful game-to-TV adaptations such as HBO's *The Last Of Us*. "If we can get access to the Unreal Engine builds, we can then start to export Ultra-HD video files from those and create cinematic versions of those games which are tactile and can be consumed on consoles or connected TVs," Slatter says. "We're really trying to help publishers of console and PC games bring some of that graphically rich, quality content to new audiences."

As for where Flavourworks' games should live, given their reliance on touch interactions – as implied by the name of the TouchVideo tech – the obvious answer seems to be mobile. *Erica* began as a PS4 exclusive in 2019, played using the controller's touchpad or via a companion smartphone app, but was quickly ported to iOS and Android wholesale; *Cuttlefish*, its latest game, arrived on mobile first. Then again, *Erica* received a PC port in 2021, and *Cuttlefish* will also soon ►

"I THINK FOR
SOMETHING LIKE THE
ALTER, ITS HOME IS ON
NETFLIX OR PRIME VIDEO"



be available on Steam, so it's clear that interactive films cannot ignore traditional channels of game distribution – in part since there's no single perfect answer to this question.

Smartphones and tablets can provide access to the widest possible audience, but they're also hardly ideal for creating an absorbing, cinematic experience – just ask Martin Scorsese. The living-room TV is constrained by streaming technology, while the more technically dextrous consoles and PCs bring an audience that is used to spending £10 on an indie game (an exorbitant fee on mobile) but are inaccessible to those who are more viewer than player. For Flavourworks, then, the natural home of interactive films is "everywhere", Pring says, adding that if Wales Interactive could put them on a toaster for people to enjoy, it would. Accordingly, *The Isle Tide Hotel* is coming to PC, mobile, Switch, and both extant generations of PS and Xbox hardware – but not toasters, at least not yet.

However, there is another possibility. As we've seen for ourselves, *The Gallery* is being screened in cinemas in addition to being made available on consoles, PC and smartphones, and Raschid is hoping that we'll see more interactive films reach the big screen. "With the rise of immersive theatre, and the rise of immersive cinema with *Secret Cinema*, I think people are looking for something a bit more experiential and with a bit more agency in their entertainment," he says. "I think, ultimately, it really does have a place in the cinema."

This isn't the first time an interactive film has appeared on the silver screen, either. Wales Interactive's *Late Shift* made it into cinemas back in 2017, with audiences making decisions via a companion app on their smartphones. But Raschid wanted to try something different, not least because no one needs more screens in a cinema, especially if someone's WhatsApp notifications are pinging throughout the movie. "It just takes you out of the world, doesn't it?" he says. "People having to intermittently take their eyes off the screen to go and look at their phone, it breaks the immersion."

Instead, he handed out glowsticks to the audience, then sat in front of the screen with his laptop. As he highlighted one choice on the big screen, a portion of the audience would choose it by raising their glowsticks. Then he highlighted the other option and noted how many raised their glowsticks, before selecting the option with the most votes. It's a distinctly low-tech solution but a fun one, encouraging a sense of communal spirit. "It did evoke laughs and groans, and people interacting with each other, whereas I think with something more anonymous and blind, you remove that element."

The idea of more interactive films making it into cinemas is an intriguing prospect, whether they're accompanied by

touchscreen interactions or simple glowsticks. It opens up the possibility of repeat viewings, as cinemagoers potentially go back to see different outcomes, as well as that social aspect of applauding (or silently judging) the decisions of those around you. Then again, in the cinema, these interactive films will be going toe to toe with big-budget Hollywood blockbusters, which means audiences might be less willing to forgive the odd wonky prop here and there.

The reality is that makers of interactive films have to do a lot with very little. Scenes have to be shot and reshot to accommodate every branching plotline, and each production contains hours and hours of footage, necessitating a much longer and more complicated shoot than a regular film, so budgets are necessarily stretched thin. *Bandersnatch*, for example, reportedly cost around twice as much to make as a regular episode of *Black Mirror*.

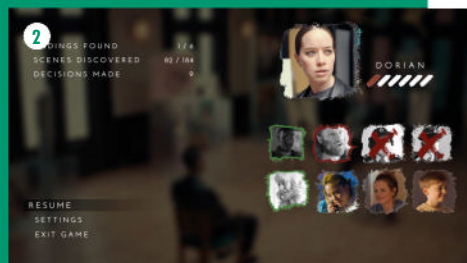
Given the extra expense and effort involved to make an interactive movie, it's little surprise that they have yet to hit the mainstream, and *Slatter* is under no illusions that interactive movies will become the dominant model. "But there's a space for it, and I think that there's a lot of headroom for adoption, as the types of experiences improve and get refined." Pring is confident that eventually we'll see some kind of breakthrough.

"We've been having conversations with some of the biggest studios in film and TV, and what we're finding is they're very slowmoving, in terms of the big guys. They've got ways they like to do stuff, and it takes a long time for those wheels to start moving." But

he reckons "it will happen" – and it won't be long before some huge, multimillion-dollar IP enters this space. It's tempting to imagine what a big deal it would be if, say, Marvel made its next movie interactive. It would certainly make sense in terms of telling stories in the multiverse.

For the time being, though, interactive films remain a relatively small, if growing, niche – and one that, as is so often the case with a tight ecosystem, is evolving rapidly. *Swamp Motel* has some ambitions on that front. "We really like the idea of episodes that are only viewable once you have unlocked them," Garritty says with a grin. "So you would do something akin to one of our online experiences to break open your stream to watch episode one, and then, if you picked up enough of the clues while watching it, you'd know where to go to break open episode two." Coming from someone who doesn't play the things, this falls much closer to the way videogames handle progress, with the same benefits. "You pay full attention, you've got the remote in your hand, you're making notes, you're coming up with theories, which is a great experience," Jones says. "But yeah," he sighs. "It probably has a more niche appeal." ■

"PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING WITH A BIT MORE AGENCY IN THEIR ENTERTAINMENT"



THE GALLERY

Paul Raschid's first interactive movie was *The Complex for Wales Interactive*, but he developed this latest project with his own production company. *The Gallery* is actually two films set in two years, 1981 and 2021, and tells the story of a gallery owner being taken hostage. In each time, the main roles are gender-swapped, and the outcome of the story is determined by an accumulation of decisions along the way, rather than a linear path.



Matt Hunter



- 1 The 2021 version of *The Gallery* features a male gallery owner, but the role is gender-swapped in the version set in 1981.
- 2 Characters can die as a result of your choices, so they might not be around to help at key points.
- 3 Raschid chose the years 1981 and 2021 because he saw "parallels between that Britain and the Britain that we live in", not least a high level of dissatisfaction with the government, which ties into the hostage taker's motivations.
- 4 Choices affect the level of trust between hostage taker and hostage, which impacts on the ending.
- 5 Paul Raschid, writer and director of *The Gallery*

T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



T H E C A S E O F T H E G O L D E N I D O L

How two Latvian brothers, seeking to build a better tower defence, instead reimaged the whodunnit

By JON BAILES

Format PC, Switch
Developer Color Gray Games
Publisher Playstack
Origin Latvia
Release 2022

Anyone who's played *Color Gray Games'* offbeat detective story will know that it revolves around a sinister secret brotherhood, a Freemason-like cult obsessed with sticking to the upper rungs of society. It was a very different kind of brotherhood that brought the game into being, however, as a pair of Latvian siblings – one an artist, the other a programmer and former co-founder of a social-networking game firm – combined their talents to produce this indie gem. Not that they necessarily expected to get that far, having set out with extremely modest ambitions.

As we discuss the origin story of *The Case Of The Golden Idol* with **Ernests** and **Andrejs Klavins**, words such as “dabble” and “tinker” establish a prevailing theme. Ernests had worked for some 20 years at newspapers and a weekly journal providing a range of art, including political cartoons, but had dabbled in game design along the way. Meanwhile, Andrejs' company, Next Level SIA, had boomed and then gone bust. “For some years we were very successful,” he says. “Then we were tremendously unsuccessful.” He left the game industry disillusioned – but in time, Ernests suggested “it was a great opportunity for us to tinker with game development”.

Rather than starting with a clear concept in mind, then, the brothers initially aimed to “just play around,” Andrejs says, while he searched for a new job. They weren't even sure what kind of game to make at first – to the extent that, in another timeline, instead of *Golden Idol* we could have ended up with their take on the tower-defence genre. Aiming to create a prototype, they looked for a “problem” in the industry they wanted to solve, and two concepts rose to the surface. On one hand, they wanted to see more detective games in the mould of *Return Of The Obra Dinn*, which actually delivered a detective experience. On the other, they wanted to address an issue they saw in tower-defence games, where playing them is often exciting and compelling, but “then you suddenly lose and that's it,” Andrejs says. We may never know their solution to the latter, since it was, of course, the former idea they pursued.

The first prototype wasn't even a snippet of the final game, but rather a self-contained scenario involving a Polish student found dead in his dorm room. You could examine the location and look at closeups of objects, Andrejs explains, but *Golden Idol's* crucial ‘thinking panel’ – a separate screen where you organise the clues you've found – had



Literary inspiration came more from 19th-century sources, especially Dickens, but also Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*

yet to be conceived. In the original concept, solutions were far less guided than the fill-in-the-blanks version they later settled on, asking you to build full sentences from scratch. “We tested it a couple of times,” Andrejs says, “and I realised that constructing a sentence is difficult and overwhelming. [Plus] people can construct sentences which make sense, but aren't the

“ON ONE HAND
THERE'S THIS
ENLIGHTENMENT ERA
STARTING, AND ON
THE OTHER THERE'S A
LOT OF CHEAP GIN”

answers we want.” Still, the overall direction of the prototype was sound, so they started to flesh it out.

The game's 18th-century setting was another thing they conjured up only after the prototype, and Ernests goes so far as to describe it as “a random decision”. Indeed, while the idea of basing the story around a cursed artefact was in place early on, initially the brothers considered creating a time-hopping yarn, only starting in the 18th century before jumping to the 1980s, back to the distant past and so on. When they did elect to focus on a single period, it was intended to call on familiar tropes of classic detective fiction while trying to avoid the most obvious route of a 19th-century Victorian vibe.

A similar process led to them centring their cases in an alternate-reality Britain during the empire. “When people think of detectives, I think England is one of the first things that comes to mind,” Andrejs says – and the tone felt right. “It's

old-timey, not like hardboiled police detectives. There's this aesthetic of castles and aristocrats. All of that made us feel that England is the right place to go.” Imagining their own version of the country also had practical as well as creative motivations. “We could make the plot how we wanted it, not being dependent on actual historical events,” Ernests explains – before adding frankly that, for a more authentic take, “You need to know history well, which we don't.”

One aspect of history Ernests did know, though, was that of art, which helped him compose and produce the game's ‘frozen’ scenes. The paintings of 18th-century British artist William Hogarth were key here, both in the way his images depict dramatic movement and activity, and in their satirical content. *Golden Idol's* scenes of decadence and skulduggery are an attempt to capture “the big social situation of the 18th century,” Ernests explains, “where on one hand there's this Enlightenment era starting, and on the other hand there's a lot of cheap gin and alcohol, and everything is changing. Some people are suffering because some are getting rich.” His rather grotesque character designs, meanwhile, draw on the work of 19th-century French artist Gustav Doré, although Andrejs believes his brother didn't need much inspiration on that count. “I think the reality is that Ernests really likes drawing ugly bastards,” he laughs. Indeed, was there ever a worry that the characters might be too ugly, putting people off? “It can be divisive,” Ernests concedes. “But we don't want to lose our character, and become too plain.”

If anything, the duo were more concerned about their decision to use pixel art to produce these satirical frescos. They settled on the technique because Ernests felt that, based on feedback from his Instagram portfolio, it was a popular choice, plus it was a good way to create scenes quickly. And yet, he says, “it was probably a mistake”, because it may have created false assumptions about the game. Pixel art is very recognisable, but polarising, Andrejs elaborates, in part because a lot of “low-effort games also have pixel art”. People may thus associate pixel art with laziness, he believes, and expect the whole game to be of poor quality. “It's fundamental in the creative challenge that you somehow signal that you are not low-effort crap.”

Certainly, when it came to refining the game's systems, some required a lot more effort than ▶

others. Spread across a handful of still screens displaying the moment of a character's death, "the presentation of information was supereasy," Andrejs says. The idea here was that players had access to all the information immediately, rather than, say, having to unlock doors to access certain areas, and that you could flick between screens from an external view instead of having to walk through them. There were, however, still difficulties to iron out in the processes of turning evidence into solutions. Having abandoned the idea of getting players to construct full sentences, they reduced the scope to creating phrases, but it was still too open. "At first we were ambitious," Andrejs explains. "You could gather any word you see in the scene. We quickly dropped that because there was a huge amount of words."

The thinking panel in the final game would narrow the player's focus further, providing partial sentences that needed completing with collected keywords. Meanwhile, sub-puzzles served as mid-scene progress checks, to see if players had correctly identified the characters involved, for example, before tackling the big question of whodunnit. "I didn't feel good about this approach," Andrejs says, "because I thought the text between slots will hint things, and the fact that you gather some phrases and leave some behind will hint things. Platonically, it's far from the ideal." Yet when people tested it, they didn't care much about these arbitrary constructs – they enjoyed the clarity and structure of the task. "I feel the moment when we broke it down in the stages was the moment when our whole concept was fully formed," he says.

Even so, these compromises remain contentious for Andrejs. While players perhaps needed the guidance, it introduced the potential to brute-force many solutions using logical guesses. "I still feel ambivalent about it," he admits. He likes that it overcomes the "zero or one state" that many classic adventure games suffer from, where you're either progressing or stuck. But at the same time, he continues, it's more challenging from a design perspective, with puzzles requiring additional layers to ensure some level of understanding. "Otherwise, [players] can sometimes sidestep it completely and just ignore big parts of the game by guessing." For his part, though, Ernests seems more at peace with the decision. "We needed ways for people to have early success," he says, "to verify some simple information." It's also crucial, he feels, to stop players scrapping solutions that may contain only minor errors. "The idea was to

Q&A

Andrejs Klavinš
Game designer
and programmer

How big a challenge was it to get started as an indie studio?

Up to the point when we got the publisher, I wouldn't call it a smooth experience. It's super-stressful because of the uncertainty. I have this idea that you have to somehow validate what you're working on in roughly three or four months, otherwise you should drop it. Because the last thing you want to do is spend years building something nobody cares about, which I think is a common problem in the indie-game business. And this uncertainty – whether you should you drop it or not, are you doing the right thing, are these marketing posts the right approach – can be very stressful.

So all that changed once you made a deal with publisher Playstack?

Yeah. Finding a publisher is also scary, because it's a big business, which can be quite shady. You fear that you may get taken advantage of. But in our case, once we met them, they became excited about us, we became excited about them, and it was harmonious. They gave us creative freedom, and at the same time we were super-happy to ask for feedback. We actually wanted to hear what their thoughts were.

How long did it take to make the game?

If we take the first prototype as a starting date, the launch date was one and a half years later. But [in terms of] effective development, I'd say around a year. And I want to mention one thing, which I'm extremely proud of – we did not have any crunch when developing this game. The game was completely finished two weeks before the deadline. Overall, except for this being an indie experience, it has not been stressful at all. Once we got like the publisher and the funding, it was surprisingly smooth sailing.



situation, and when you solve this, it's logical and you understand it." A first look around a scene should thus leave players, well, puzzled, asking who died or who killed them or even what the heck is going on. "It has to be a puzzle, but also has to move the story forward," Ernests says. But then the more you guess, the more you lose the overall thread, and the more confused you become going forward. "We had a conversation with our composer," Andrejs recalls, "and we were astonished he had finished the game but still had so many questions afterwards."

Still, if the Klavinš don't believe they quite found a perfect solution – if such a thing even exists – the success of *Golden Idol* is no doubt a comfort, even affording them the opportunity to answer some leftover story questions with DLC episode *The Spider Of Lanka*. Once again here, they set out with something more challenging in mind, before eventually changing tack. "My reference point was *Dark Souls* expansions, which are usually more difficult than the main game," Andrejs says. "We built a pretty huge, complex scenario, then realised it would be quite a shock for someone who hadn't played *Golden Idol* for some time." The first case at least thus offers a more gentle reintroduction.

As for whether *Spider Of Lanka* will be the last of *Golden Idol*, Ernests and Andrejs can't say, but they are certain that the tower defence concept will remain on ice for now. "The only thing we can reveal at the moment is that we want to continue capitalising on this detective genre," Andrejs says.

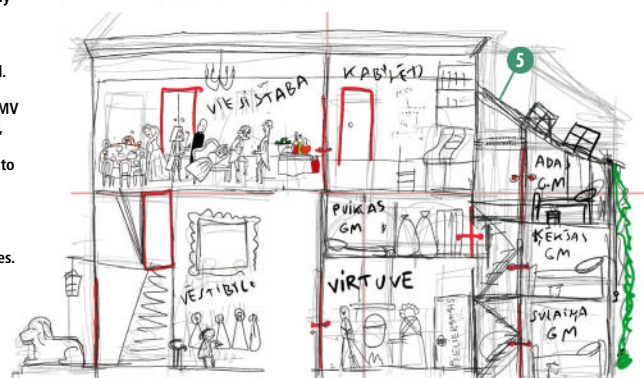
That also means the brothers will continue working together, which seems a very complementary relationship, given their contrasting skills. "Ernests is more strong in his artistic and narrative intuition," Andrejs says. "I have more business and management experience, dealing with the operational crap." Yet while the two had collaborated before, creating comics and participating in local Latvian game development contests, he admits he was a little surprised just how few difficulties they had working together on a project of this size. Perhaps that's because they are only two people, so it's easier to talk through conflicts, he muses. Plus, "we've trained to be trigger-happy, to kill off our ideas" – so that if either is convinced something doesn't work, it goes. Ernests underlines the point that they're different but on the same page with a typically less elaborate answer. "We're used to each other," he says. "It went smoothly." ■

communicate that you've almost got it right. You don't need to reconsider all your assumptions."

One issue here is that the scenes and puzzles in *Golden Idol* are also the vehicle for advancing its narrative. A clear picture of events is important in order to follow the plot as well as to reach the bottom of an individual case, but by design you're thrust into each scene without context, and figuring the who, the what and the why is precisely the challenge. "My influence here is the first scene in *Breaking Bad* where you see the flying pants," Ernests says, "and the episode explains how this situation could happen. You pick some unusual



- 1 A rogues' gallery of Ernests' often grotesque and occasionally slightly alarming pixel art.
- 2 During the design process, prototype characters occupy scenes until events are finalised.
- 3 One obscure source of inspiration came from a 2008 FMV game called *Bow Street Runner*, which was set in 18th-century London and made by Littlecloud to promote a drama on Channel 4.
- 4 The satire grew organically from the brothers' sense of humour, with Monty Python among their formative influences.
- 5 The challenge is always to get the balance of the puzzles just right. "We've created 15 scenarios and still don't have a good framework for how to do it," Andrejs says



STUDIO PROFILE

TRIBAND GAMES

How the studio behind What
The Golf? carved out a niche
by defying expectations

By LEWIS PACKWOOD



Triband

Founded 2015

Employees 36

Key staff Tim Garbos (co-founder, creative director), Peter Bruun (co-founder, CEO)

URL www.triband.net

Selected softography *What The Golf?*, *What The Bat?*, *What The Car?*

Current projects *What The TBA?*

What does a “100 per cent comedy studio” look like? “When you enter, the first thing you see is a full-size golden horse statue,” offers **Tim Garbos**, co-founder of Copenhagen’s Triband Games. It’s not real gold, he hastens to add. Right next to it is a portrait of Napoleon with googly eyes. As the décor suggests, comedy is very much at the top of Triband’s agenda.

Since scoring a huge hit with the release of *What The Golf?* via Apple Arcade in 2019, the studio has been fully committed to making comedy games – and at quite a rate, too. In 2022, Triband continued the series with VR entry *What The Bat?*, in which the player’s hands become baseball bats, used to complete a series of increasingly bizarre tasks for which they’re amusingly ill-suited. Triband then returned to Apple Arcade in May of this year with the release of *What The Car?*, ostensibly a racing game in which the titular vehicle has legs, but which – as ever – turns out to be something quite different indeed. In the meantime, *What The Golf?* has been ported to PC and Switch, having received various updates over the years, including a suite of levels based on *Among Us*.

Garbos, it turns out, has a long history of wonderfully silly projects. Back in 2013, for example, he worked on ‘Sing To Ride’, a ticket-vending machine at a Copenhagen rail station that doubled as a karaoke booth. If travellers were able to deliver an impressive enough vocal performance, the machine would dispense a metro ticket free of charge. But right before the foundation of Triband, he was working on a terrible licensed game. “I was hanging out with Peter [Bruun], my co-founder,” he recalls, “and someone asked me, ‘What’s the worst movie you’ve ever watched?’” The answer was *Reptilicus*, a universally panned 1961 Danish film about a monster rampaging through Copenhagen. Bruun and Garbos, who had first met at the Danish studio SYBO, naturally decided to make a game about it, going so far as to procure the rights.

Development didn’t get far. But the collaboration kickstarted the pair into forming a company, and they were determined to do something different from the heavily genre-based games they’d been hired to work on before. “We really wanted to make something fresh and original,” Garbos says of the project that became *What The Golf?* “It didn’t start with the word ‘comedy,’” he adds. “But it was kind of in there.



FROM LEFT **Tim Garbos**, co-founder and creative director at Triband Games, and **Peter Bruun**, co-founder and CEO

We wanted to surprise players, and especially this thing about setting up expectations and subverting them.” Basing the game around golf was key to this. Garbos says he has never played golf and has no particularly strong feelings about it either way, but points out that everybody knows how to play it: get the ball into the hole. “It’s a thing everyone can relate to, and if you want to subvert expectations, there needs to be expectations.”

THE RESULT TAKES THE PLAYER ON A JOURNEY THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT ITSELF

The project began as a game called *Golf Versus Evil*, but it evolved dramatically along the way. “That game took so many iterations and pivots,” Garbos recalls. “It has been so many different games. And at some point, we were just like, ‘If we keep making a new game every month, it’s not going to work out.’” Then they had a brainwave: why not take all those ideas and put them into the same game? The result takes the player on a journey through the landscape of game development itself, exposing them to the ideas that are pitched, played around with, and ultimately abandoned for something else. Here, any idea was seized upon. “We just got into this flow,” Garbos says. “You look around the office: ‘There’s an office chair. OK, I’m gonna turn that into a golf game.’” This anything-goes approach even extended to pastiches of other indie titles, such as *Super Hot*.

Was it as much fun to make as it is to play? “I’m not gonna lie, there were definitely ‘Oh my god, how is this ever gonna turn into a real game?’ moments,” Garbos says. But, he adds,

it was a refreshing antidote to the typical treadmill of game development. “We were tired of working on projects for too long,” he admits; developing *What The Golf?*, by contrast, was akin to entering a series of game jams, creating dozens of games back to back.

Towards the end of development there were seven people on the team, and Garbos got the first inkling it might be a hit when the game was shown at PAX. The developers thought the game was funny, but didn’t know for sure whether others would agree until that first outing. “People were just standing there playing, and they were laughing out loud,” Garbos explains. “I don’t think I’ve ever worked on anything where people

were laughing out loud. That was the moment we knew that there’s going to be a lot of people who are going to love this.” Since then, Triband has committed to making nothing but comedy games. How do they know when something is funny? The first step, says Garbos, is making yourself laugh. “If you can then show it to a colleague and just convince one other person that it’s funny and they laugh,” he says, “then you’re going in a pretty good direction.”

Part of the humour in *What The Golf?* and *What The Car?* stems from their intentionally awkward controls, a familiar trope seen in other comedy games such as *Octodad* and *Getting Over It*. But that can easily tip over into frustration. “It needs to be obvious to the player that it’s intentionally awkward, because the moment the player thinks it’s just bad controls, no one thinks it’s funny,” Garbos says. “It needs to hit that balance where the intent is clear.” One way Triband tries to achieve this involves starting a conversation with the player by deliberately tricking them, with the controls causing

STUDIO PROFILE



Triband proudly declares "We make comedy games!" on its website, and the studio plans to stick to developing comedic titles for the foreseeable future, chiefly by creating more entries in the successful *What The...?* series, as well as updating and expanding existing games

unexpected outcomes. Soon enough, the player learns to expect the unexpected.

Triband's success has seen its headcount balloon to 36, though its staff are organised into small teams not much bigger than the original *What The Golf?* group, each working on different projects. "One of the decisions when growing the company was that we don't want to manage big production teams," Garbos says. "We don't want to be that kind of company. We want to make original ideas that can be made with fairly small teams that are just doing one thing." Rather than scale up in terms of, say, producing more intricate art or audio, the focus is instead on exploring different gameplay ideas. "We're trying to be good at gameplay and decent at all the other things."

The studio emphasises on its website that "games are made by teams" rather than lone wolves; indeed, Garbos says that the company's focus has been on building teams rather than games. "We try to invite everyone as part of the creative process," he says, and because the studio's titles tend to be made up of lots of smaller minigames, "if we get an idea, we can fit it in somewhere, usually." Not everything makes the cut, of course, but it means the team can try out lots of ideas, and Garbos firmly believes those can come from just about anywhere.

Part of the creative process involves holding meetings where all involved are free to come up with jokes and puns. Garbos says these are usually fun, "but other times it's probably similar to writing rooms, where you iterate too much on something, and then instead someone just writes something silly or stupid, and that's going to be the thing that makes people smile." This process became a lot more difficult during COVID. Garbos found that although developers could be productive while working remotely, it was harder to come up with things that made people laugh

when everyone was at home. "The very creative moments happen in the office – and probably not in the planned meeting rooms with whiteboards, but around coffee or couches."

So do new hires have to be funny? "We ask people if they play an instrument," Garbos smiles. "It has no influence on the job application process, but it's nice to know. The company is called Triband, so if we ever start Triband Band, it's nice to know what sort of music we're going to have to write. But no, I don't think you need to be funny. You need to be a wonderful person. And I think we have a lot of those."

"No crunch: People over deadlines" is another proud declaration on Triband's website.

What The Bat? in VR. "I think it's just something we are excited about – all the gameplay that comes from trying new things, it ties very much into what we're doing," Garbo says, while acknowledging that the VR space is tiny compared to the potential audience of the smartphone market. "Obviously in terms of the amount of players, *What The Bat?* is not comparable to *Golf?*, but the fact that it was a launch title on PSVR2, that really helps put you on the VR map, so I think it did very well within those bounds." He adds that more updates for *What The Bat?* are on the way, and the studio has various prototypes for all sorts of different directions targeting various technologies.

"I DON'T THINK YOU NEED TO BE FUNNY. YOU NEED TO BE A WONDERFUL PERSON. AND I THINK WE HAVE A LOT OF THOSE"

How does that work out in practice? Garbos thinks Triband hasn't broken its pledge so far, at least in terms of working hours – "but... stress can happen, and you can be worried about things. It's about being mindful about that." Regarding practical ways of combating crunch, he says that the most successful strategy so far has simply been adding half a year to the production time of each game as it nears launch.

In terms of Triband's future, Garbos says there will certainly be further *What The...?* games. "I can announce that we are definitely making more games with that name in areas we know very little about," he grins. "We're just out to make parodies, spoofs, or have fun with a lot of different game genres." That includes targeting emerging technologies, just as the studio did with

But is he worried about tying Triband to a single series? If the *What The...?* games are all about defying expectations, aren't successive entries essentially an expectation fulfilled rather than subverted? "Maybe the final game is just a very, very serious game," he chuckles. "You're an accounting manager or something." But he adds that he's not concerned about the appeal of the series waning over time. "I think we're gonna grow tired before the players do. If we grow tired of whatever direction we're running in, we're definitely gonna change it and do something else." For now, then, we can expect Triband to remain true to form – not least because thinking up new titles is too much trouble. "Coming up with names for videogames is one of the hardest things ever," Garbos smiles. "So if you ever find a good one, just stick to it." ■



- 1 *What The Golf?* was released in 2019, when the studio numbered around half a dozen people.
- 2 Triband experimented with VR for *What The Bat?* in 2022. The player is given baseball bats for hands and presented with a series of increasingly absurd tasks.
- 3 *What The Car?* is ostensibly a racing game in which your car has legs. However, it diverts down all sorts of unexpected avenues, with pastiches of *Frogger* and *Overcooked*

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

NEAR MISSES

Pikmin 4 Switch

An unfortunately timed embargo would have put the kibosh on an early review even if we'd been able to squeeze in enough time between writing 100 previews to finish the game within a few days.

For now, we can tell you that the tutorial – with shades of *Chibi-Robo* in the way your diminutive hero explores an outsized domestic setting – is utterly charming, and that it appears to have a gentler difficulty curve than its predecessors. We're still mildly perturbed by your pup ally Oatchi – not for his lack of nose this time, but because he seems perhaps a little too helpful, while the tension of needing to head home before nightfall could be lost thanks to the new Glow Pikmin. The third game hit the Goldilocks zone for sequels; our fear is that this could be another *Toy Story 4*, where the fourth iteration is pleasant enough but largely extraneous. Conclusions will have to wait for *E388*'s review.

Sludge Life 2 PC

The original casually rocked up unannounced just as we'd finalised *E374*'s Play section, so we ended up reviewing it in *TMOE*. We had half a mind to repeat the trick for its sequel, having waited patiently until launch day to play it, but deadline rather got in the way. Pity, since its opening hour suggest it's more of the same – which in this case is a good thing. As before, you tag and traverse a compact, richly drawn open world that throbs with life even if most of the characters within it are content to sit still. There's a mission of sorts, but who cares? *Sludge Life 2* is largely indifferent to what you do here. As such, it's all the more likely that we'll make time to muck about.

Everybody's 1-2 Switch Switch

Announcing a sequel via social media four weeks before release with nothing but a single piece of key art before ignoring it entirely during a software showcase with just nine days to go? Not a ringing endorsement, is it? Of course, this isn't for the people who tune in to every Direct crossing their fingers for an *F-Zero* sequel. And Nintendo at least deigned to reveal a little more in the following weeks. With support for up to 100 players (only locally, of course) and smartphones serving as substitute controllers for a generous helping of its raucous minigames, this budget-priced followup could well prove an unlikely hit at gatherings. Alas, of the things that were given away, some review code was not among them.



Explore the iPad edition of *Edge* for extra Play content

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Party's over

There has been a lot of talk during the run-up to (and, as we type this, in the immediate aftermath of) the release of *Final Fantasy XVI* about whether it really qualifies as a *Final Fantasy* game at all. With an increased focus on fast-paced action that recalls nothing so much as the *Bayonetta* series (the news that PlatinumGames was involved in development seemed, in hindsight, to be a rather obvious revelation), it's been suggested that the game might have strayed too far from its RPG roots. But this ignores that just about every *Final Fantasy* has been distinct from its predecessor. True, *FFXVI* takes things to new levels, but this is a series that is at least partly defined by the differences among its many incarnations. As such, given the wholesale changes to combat, structure and tone, you might even say that in a way it is quintessentially *Final Fantasy*.

But that does raise another question: beyond the desire to diverge from the path laid out by the games that came before it, what is the essence of this series? Any sequel, remake or reboot should surely try to recapture some part of what made it special in the first place. *C-Smash VRS* pays homage to Dreamcast game *Cosmic Smash* through its minimalist looks, orange-and-white colour scheme and Ken Ishii soundtrack. *Oxenfree II: Lost Signals*, on the other hand, follows a little too closely in the footsteps of the first game, coming off as nothing more than a disappointing retread.

An adaptation such as *Aliens: Dark Descent* faces a different challenge, as it strives to evoke the terror of its source in interactive form. It achieves that by a design choice that at first seems counter-intuitive – your four-person squad must move as one. But via its Stress and Alien Aggressiveness systems, developer Tindalos Interactive captures the back-to-the-wall desperation of James Cameron's sci-fi classic. After all, splitting up the group isn't always the smartest move.



Final Fantasy XVI

What makes a *Final Fantasy* game a *Final Fantasy* game? A world in crisis? Probably. A group of youthful combatants with assorted skills and body types? Usually. A reality reliant on gems and infested with monsters? Typically. A cast of mythical creatures summoned to battle from the ether? Frequently. The loss of a beloved character? Occasionally. That tinkling, crystalline, arpeggiated melody? Yellow chocobos? White moogles? Ethnic diversity? Fifteen mainline games and a host of spin-offs have shown that while these ingredients are characteristic of the series, none is essential. *Final Fantasy* is a generously pliable fiction, a series built from touchstones that teams can pick and arrange in any number of configurations, to varying degrees of success.

Within five minutes of *Final Fantasy XVI*'s opening, we have seen a character light a cigarette using a magic finger, witnessed an almost-sex scene up against a wall in a castle corridor, and watched a soldier who fights in a squadron called The Bastards sprint across a battlefield while repeatedly shrieking, "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck". Even within the loose boundaries that encircle this long-running series, it's clear director Naoki Yoshida is eager for everyone to know this is not *Final Fantasy* as we have known it. Having salvaged the 14th game, a failing MMORPG, and turned it into a long-running, high-earning success, he is perhaps the only person who has earned the right – or maybe the institutional power – to modernise *Final Fantasy* with only nods to tradition.

The extent of the renovation is clearest not in the bedroom (although there is more nudity in this game than in Square Enix's entire back catalogue) but on the battlefield. *Final Fantasy*'s developers always sought to introduce time pressure to its fights. The Active Time Battle system allowed players to ponder which moves to make from a list of menu options, but without pausing the clock on their opponents. All of that is gone. This is *Final Fantasy* performed in the style of *Bayonetta*: a game of rapid stabs and flicks interspersed with cinematic crescendos powered by onscreen button prompts. Each fight is composed from a deeply customisable set of sword swipes and magical spells issued like bullets fired from an Uzi. Feints and time-slurring parries grant skilled players room to showboat. Even against the most modest foe, the screen fills with so many fizzing particle effects that it's often impossible to tell man from monster. It is glorious and mildly scandalous – the first of several design decisions intended to broaden the series' appeal at the risk of alienating its keenest followers.

You play as Clive Rosfield, supposedly the runt of a litter of nobleborn children (yet somehow also the most broad-shouldered and driven) – "the archduke's firstborn failure", as one character refers to him. Clive has been passed over in favour of his sibling, Joshua, who's able to channel the power of Eikons, the mystical summons of *Final Fantasy* tradition. Gone is the conventional party

Developer/publisher Square Enix
(Creative Business Unit III)
Format PS5
Release Out now

This is *Final Fantasy* performed in the style of *Bayonetta*: a game of rapid stabs and flicks

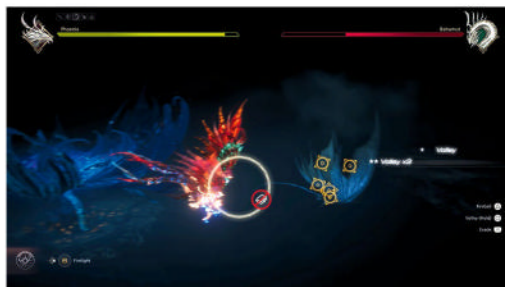


system. Clive is accompanied in battle by his ferocious dog, Torgal, and up to two companions. But you can neither pick these comrades nor equip or instruct them. Instead, all focus is on Clive, as you assign and upgrade moves from an ever-broadening selection of attacks and defensive manoeuvres, drawn from the Eikons whose powers you absorb, one by one, across the arc of the story.

Owing to concern, perhaps, that *Final Fantasy* traditionalists might not adapt to the game's action core, Clive is seriously overpowered. While most moves have cooldowns (which can be reduced by finding and equipping the relevant accessory), after a dozen or so hours of play it's possible to unload a sequence of six major attacks in unbroken succession before you even land your first basic sword swipe on a foe. Battles with multiple waves of enemies – many of whom seem bewilderingly reticent to throw a punch or murmur out a spell – are a breeze; only fights against 'marks', optional bounties lifted straight out of *Final Fantasy XII*, and major bosses risk hurling you towards the Game Over screen. Even then, generous checkpointing and auto-refills of potions all but guarantees success on the second attempt. Most moves can be upgraded at least once, too, with ability points awarded from fights, and you can redeploy the points between attacks without penalty.

Valisthea is a world gripped by climate chaos, a sickness named 'blight' that withers grass and kills trees until nothing will grow. It has set the world's six nations against one another as they vie for arable land. Clive and his friends believe the blight is related to the mining of crystals, a practice that has damaged the environment and enslaved workers, and must therefore be shattered – perhaps the best conceivable way to turn these boring props, a series feature about which no player could truly care, into a meaningful plot device. Clive's interior conflict provides further intrigue: he is initially driven by desire for revenge, but this shifts into a quest for redemption via his burgeoning role as a Robin Hood-style character who hopes to emancipate Valisthea's slave class of magical workers, identifiable by the brands on their faces.

Yoshida has made no secret of Game Of Thrones' influence on *Final Fantasy XVI*'s tone and aesthetic, apparently requesting all team members watch the TV adaptation of George RR Martin's novels, while Ralph Ineson, the gravel-voiced northerner who played Dagmer Cleftjaw in the series, voices a major character here. The inspiration is noticeable and mostly positive, helping to ground the story in human motivations, something post-Hironobu Sakaguchi *Final Fantasy* games have often failed to do. The game's writers cannot match Martin's ability to clearly delineate dozens of characters from one another, however. The voice acting is playful and engaging, but the cast is so large that the writers fail to furnish most with clear motivations and recognisable personalities. ►



ABOVE Arcade Mode enables you to challenge completed areas for grade-based scores. The more complex your technique, the higher the grading; consumable items and gear are fixed, but Eikonic abilities can be chosen

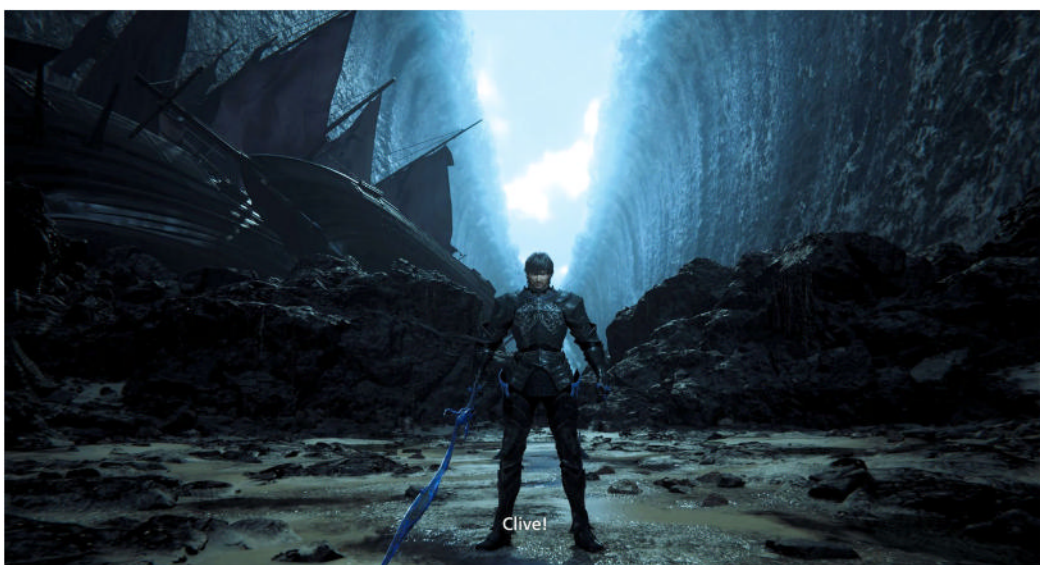


I will always be your loyal servant.

TOP Voice acting, a babble of mostly British accents, is exemplary throughout, and in the case of Clive's doting uncle, Byron Rosfield, delightfully amusing in places.

MAIN Many of the game's threads are intriguingly introduced, then left dangling. The strongest plot points feature in the earlier sections; by the final third, the story devolves, largely, into a magical fantasy, and the human motivations and conflicts that drove the narrative disappear behind a cloud of magical fireworks.

RIGHT The cutscenes are artfully directed, with expert framing. Brisker interactions, however, would have been better served as integrated conversations between characters during interactive sections – a technique long used by Rockstar and Naughty Dog to minimise interruptions to play



Clive!



Sometimes characters arrive in a mode of intimate familiarity, as if we have already spent several hours in their company (we haven't), only to disappear for long stretches, or never return at all. Because the drama never shifts perspective between individuals as in *Game Of Thrones* or *Final Fantasy VI*, it's harder to feel connected to the faces that drift in and out of Clive's field of view.

To ensure you cling to the basic story beats, Clive must occasionally attend current-affairs lessons from a historian who lives in the community you're creating. These are compulsory and their inclusion bespeaks the team's commitment to the fiction. Still, the balance too often tips toward 'tell' rather than 'show', and the regular lore dumps soon acquire the aroma of the lecture hall. To add further assistance, any cutscene can be paused at any moment to explore 'Active Time Lore', detailing information about the scene in question, the characters featured, and their loyalties. It's a simple but meaningful addition, a kind of Cliff Notes for the game's plot.

For all the grand sweep of the story, on foot the game often feels parochial. Most of your time is spent padding between villages, through flood plains and forests linked by corridors of explorable terrain. These environments are exquisitely rendered, and reminiscent of hiking over a Dartmoor or a stretch of Scottish highland, but the world feels forlornly underpopulated. You only enter cities after the population has fled, lending each metropolis an eerie ambience, and you only encounter the game's castles and palaces during set-piece escapes or assaults. Clive is supposed to be an outsider, gathering lost souls together, but the absence of bustle and crowds feels strange for a world so grandly rendered and energetically polished.

After an arresting first act, *Final Fantasy XVI*'s pace slows considerably, with a trickle of sidequests and



CLICK, CLICK, BOOM

During some of the marquee fights, which are backed by Wagnerian choirs and baroque camera sweeps, battles are occasionally interrupted by single button prompts which trigger either a 'Cinematic Evasion' or 'Cinematic Strike' – dramatic turning points in the flow of violence. These directorial intrusions are a chance for the cinematics team to flex and wink, but the execution is so dynamic and exciting that, as in the *Bayonetta* series, they are elevated to the status of satisfying interlude. The most dramatic fights happen between Eikons, which take place in vast underground halls or the expanse of outer space. These clashes have the feel of a Godzilla movie, and typically feature two screen-filling elemental gods chipping away at each other's health bars through acts of tremendous – and eventually boring – violence.

The game's economy is woefully lacking. With only one character to outfit, you craft and upgrade each new, incrementally powerful piece of gear, while outmoded kit and crafting materials pile up in your inventory

ponderous main missions. At first the optional missions suffer from the usual dissonance where one of the world's key political and military players is tasked with taking on odd jobs for a few coins: clearing a vineyard of wasps; delivering meals to punters in a tavern; chasing a dog for the letter it has snatched. Still, the function of these distractions is to provide a break from the intense business of world-saving. And in time the game's clutch of threads begins to weave together in pleasing ways, and the trickle of sidequests becomes a torrent of to-dos. These missions begin to feel more meaningful, changing the world in lasting ways, while the rewards are no longer a few gil and a pile of crafting materials, but gifts that increase the size of your inventory, or the amount potions heal, or even change the fate of entire villages.

The creative aims are clear and well-met: to create a *Final Fantasy* game with a more serious and grounded story, a more fashionable battle system and more mature themes, and to explore the societal implications of a world in which magic and monsters exist, and their effects on human ambitions and systems of power. On these counts, *Final Fantasy XVI*'s gamble is a success. But whether this is a game to inspire passion among a new generation, in the way the high points of the series did, is debatable. Clive is a likeable cipher with a meaningful mission, but for all his power he is quite ordinary, lacking the naivety and melancholy of a Jon Snow or the tragic mystery of a Cloud Strife. His supporting team is too large, too disparate and, in battle, too detached. Perhaps what makes a *Final Fantasy* game a *Final Fantasy* game are the friends you take along the way.

Post Script

A quest for liberation

For all its high-fantasy flourishes and indulgences, this is a series that has often addressed more serious topics, most memorably in *Final Fantasy VII*'s sorrowful exploration of climate catastrophe. *Final Fantasy XVI*, in an effort to import some gravity, takes on several major themes: the impact on ordinary people of the vanity and vacuity of the rich and powerful; the natural consequences of unrestrained mining of the planet's resources; the danger of becoming, through the act of opposition, that which you oppose; the risks and psychic perils of using friends to advance one's personal ambitions; the responsibility that accompanies great power; the urge to use power for good, and the temptation to deploy it for selfish purposes, particularly when violence becomes the primary catalyst for change. The game is not always an apt vehicle to explore these ideas with appropriate gravitas. Surprisingly, however, it is at its most affecting when addressing its most fraught of subjects: slavery.

Bearerers are citizens of Valisthea born with the power to cast magic without the need of a crystal — a kind of mystical battery that is used to power everything from lamps to cigarette lighters. Rather than elevating their status within society, this gift has enslaved them. They are marked with a brand on their cheek, sold by their families into slavery and used as cheap labour. The wider population view the Bearerers as pitiful sub-humans, somewhat akin to cattle.

Not merely outcasts, Bearerers also suffer from an encroaching sickness, the cost of channelling aether through their bodies. The Crystals' Curse, as it's known, starts as aches and stiffness, then slowly petrifies the person's flesh, until their limbs are rendered immobile. Finally, the victim turns to stone and crumbles to dust. There is no known cure. At Martha's Rest, a small settlement atop a rocky tor that overlooks the marshlands of Rosaria, the innkeeper Martha pays for the care of Bearerers who are no longer fit to work, collaborating with a local clergyman to ease their suffering during the final weeks of life in a local abbey. The scenes and missions in which Clive supports this work are some of the game's best, helping to drive home the injustices inherent in the world's caste system.

In one memorable but optional mission, for example, Clive disrupts a scheme devised by a wealthy father and son to lure Bearerers to their deaths for sport. Whether you consider this manslaughter or murder, it's impossible to not become seized by a desire to see justice done to the preparators. "Bearerers are tools when they're needed, and toys when they're not," one character says. "And if one breaks, you can always buy another." The short story's resolution is carefully told, encouraging

Does Robin Hood's myth have quite the same instructive impact when he embodies the powers of an eldritch dragon?

you to question your beliefs and ideas of justice. Elsewhere, the game shows the pain of systemic inequality through more intimate details: we see the anxiety a surgeon feels when faced with the task of surgically removing the face tattoo that marks a Bearer out. Removing the mark is a dangerous operation, but one with major symbolic power.

The risks in addressing difficult topics such as emancipation, slavery and apartheid in a videogame in which you play as a white, all-powerful saviour character are obvious. This is a genre built to centre the hero, and not the victims. Besides, does Robin Hood's myth have quite the same instructive impact when he embodies the powers of an eldritch dragon? The game's writers do not leave this complexity entirely unaddressed. While Clive uses his burgeoning powers to build a community for lost and broken people, screen time is offered up to explore how power and status can have an isolating, even corrosive effect on an individual. Still, this is ultimately a game about Clive's legend; rarely do we learn what happened to the beneficiaries of his work, and never are the victims properly centred.

The absence, too, of people of colour is notable in a game about slavery. The team's well-publicised suggestion that Black and brown people did not exist in European mediaeval times doesn't hold up — they did. Giant ice dragons, flame-spewing Godzillas and rideable chickens, on the other hand, did not. Moreover, an entire portion of the game is set in the land of Sanbreque, a region obviously based on sub-Saharan settlements but populated by individuals who appear as white Europeans. This is fiction and the writers are free, of course, to write whatever and however they wish. But the omission feels, at the very least, like a sorely missed opportunity. And even if the writers wanted to avoid introducing race into the slavery storyline, which might have drawn a different kind of criticism, to plunder south-west Asian architecture and culture while whitewashing the population of these settlements feels thoughtless — not least in a story partly about the exploitation and erasure of certain groups in society.

As with much of the game, the effectiveness of its most powerful ideas is smothered by the sheer bulk of its weaker ones. A slew of fantasy novels and television shows — including *Game Of Thrones*, cited as a strong influence in *FFXVI*'s creation — have demonstrated that historically rich themes of slavery can sit alongside storylines about mythical beasts. But for all the hours of cutscenes here, still too little time is spent exploring the systems of power that created this world, or how they might be meaningfully dismantled, leaving only the quasi-pornographic pleasures of screen violence to insufficiently plug the gaps. ■



C-Smash VRS

Among *C-Smash VRS*'s many nods to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey is the way the game opens. You warp through hyperspace to an unfamiliar solar system, where something catches your eye: a black oblong, not unlike a shrunken Monolith, floating in space. When it comes within range, you instinctively reach out to grab it, only for the cuboid to transform into a racquet. It's not only an ingenious way to confirm your dominant hand, but an arresting way to welcome you into an alternate universe. One, perhaps, where *Cosmic Smash* wasn't — as in our corner of the multiverse — an obscure Dreamcast title released only in Japan but an obvious candidate for a VR reimaging.

Still, it's easy to be won over by the idea. If *Pong* and *Wii Sports* are any indication, racquet sports in videogames have significant mainstream potential. And with the paddle right there in your hand, offering 1:1 movement, VR should be even more intuitive. When everything connects, you feel the benefit of having precise control, rather than merely needing to swing your controller with reasonably good timing, as in Nintendo's game. Despite the title's suggestion, going for a smash isn't always advisable; you might be better lobbing the ball overhead, chopping at an angle to put spin on it, or batting it back softly to buy a little time.

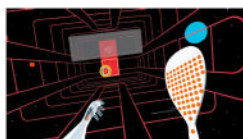
In exchange for this extra physical effort, you're rewarded with a couple of science-fiction flourishes that make things easier. When serving, a squeeze of the trigger on your non-dominant hand will pull the ball towards you, while your racquet hand can build up and charge a trick shot that not only homes in on a target but will pierce multiple panels before returning.

However, the game itself doesn't always match the precision it demands of you. If nine out of ten shots land just right, then it's hard not to linger on the remaining one — whether that was a result of failed tracking, wilful physics, or the ball landing in your blind spot. Even with PSVR2's improved field of view, your peripheral vision is far from total, something that becomes a particular problem when using the Sense thumbstick to move. With most levels the width of a standard squash court (and most players' VR space surely *not*), it's naturally preferable to having to chase the ball and contend with the cable at our feet. But moving this way results in brief moments of disorientation — not ideal when the ball is hurtling back toward you.

It's exacerbated by what can feel like an act of trolling from the arrangements of panels in Journey, *C-Smash*'s arcade-length singleplayer offering, where you must clear the screen, *Breakout* style. On occasion we find one barrier blocking almost two-thirds of the court's height, with the ball refusing to be lobbed over it. Worse are the instances when we manage to get our ball behind a barrier, only for it to be trapped on the far side. In one game we clear all but one panel with our

Developer Wolf & Wood Interactive
Publisher RapidEyeMovers
Format PSVR2
Release Out now

It's both startling and amusing to see a rival expressing annoyance, befuddlement or smugness



LOBBY BUOY

Given multiplayer is where *C-Smash* shines brightest, it's a shame that, just a few days after launch, it's all but impossible to find a game online. This is a risk inherent in any VR multiplayer game, of course, but it's hardly helped by the fact that Quick Play matchmaking lets you select only one mode at a time, leaving us fretting over whether we might have fared better with a different option. There is a minor saving grace, however: while waiting you can play warm-up games in a Tron-style red wireframe court, fed an endlessly generating succession of levels. With no time pressure (the one advantage of struggling to get a match), it delivers an experience much closer to the one we'd sought in Journey's Zen Mode.

opening shot, then watch helplessly as it bounces back and forth, out of reach, until the timer runs down.

Having a countdown timer at all feels antithetical to the promise of Journey's Zen Mode. We're ready to take our time basking in the game's crisply appealing aesthetic, which pays tribute to the Dreamcast era, and a soundtrack from Ken Ishii and Danalogue that wanders from ambient spacey synths to hard acid techno. Yet having to keep one eye on the clock, which beeps aggressively as it runs down, couldn't be less meditative. Zen's one concession is that you can retry failed stages as often as you want, in contrast to Challenge Mode, which brings your run to an end when the timer runs out — in theory. Upon selecting Journey again after failing, we find our Challenge run progress has been saved, letting us retry from the previous stage.

These issues are somewhat alleviated when playing online. In part this is down to the full-body recreations of yourself and your opponent. The natural movements of another human being are immediately recognisable: it's both startling and amusing to see a rival expressing annoyance, befuddlement or smugness, despite the fact that their character model has no face to speak of. Outside of matches, riding the cosmic bus that ferries you to each game, you might find yourself engaging in a dance-off or even leaning in for a hug. The sense of presence is so remarkable that we briefly wonder if Zuckerberg was onto something with that 'legs' business.

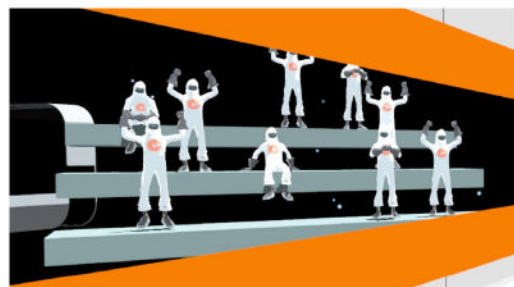
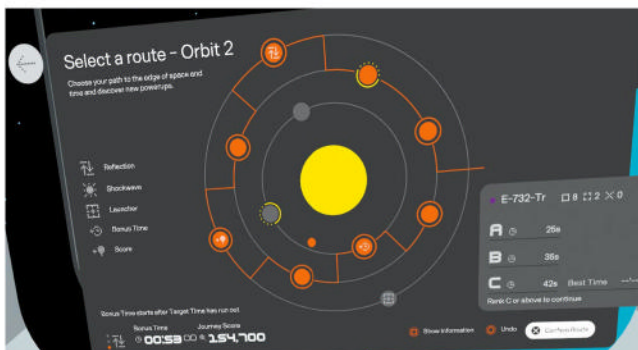
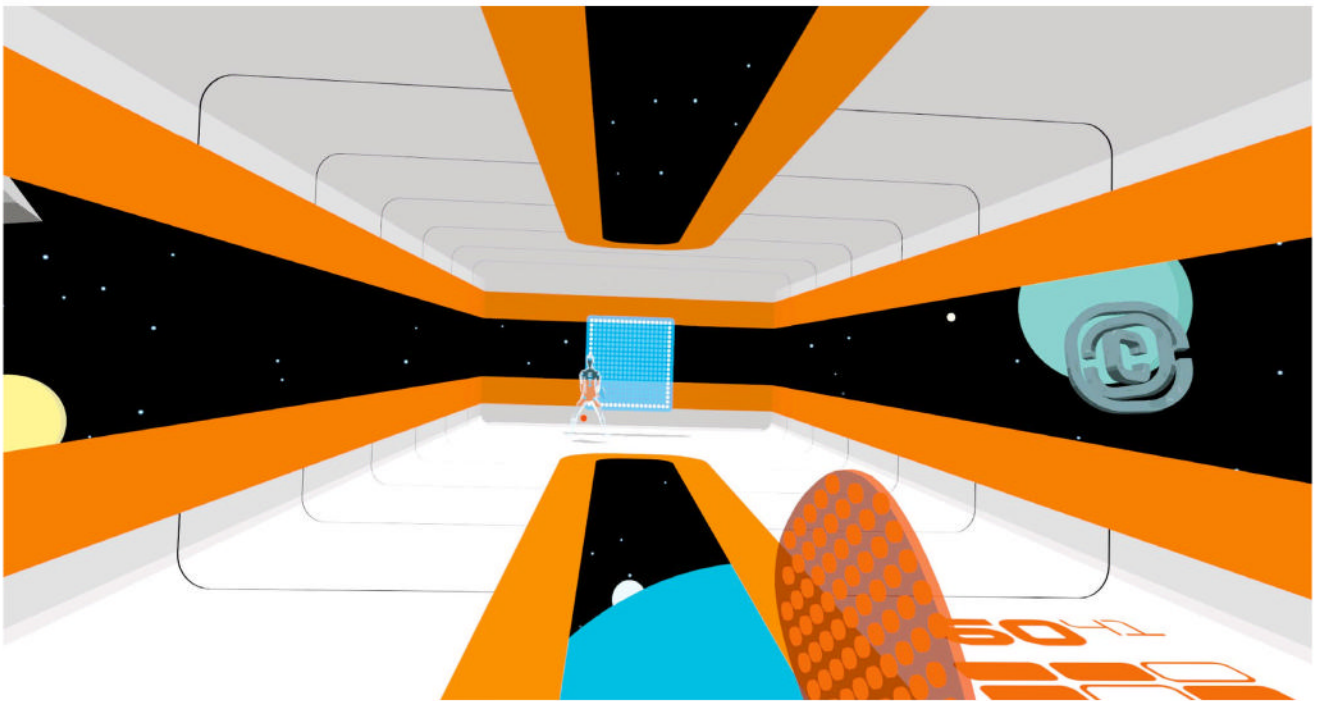
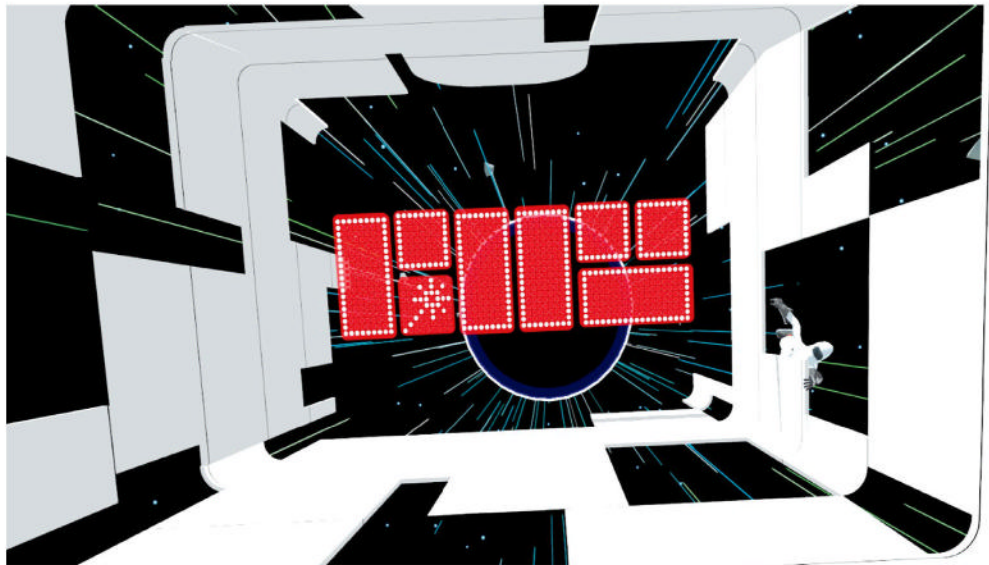
The game is a different beast in multiplayer, too, with four modes to reinvent the simple core of knocking a ball around a court. Head-To-Head has you competing to hit the most panels while blocking your opponent's shots; Firewall plays almost by *Splatton* rules, where the panels you hit are painted your colour; in the dodgeball-like Bodyshot you score points by striking your rival; finally, Quickshot features a single panel that steadily grows, with more points awarded for striking it when it's smaller. They're all enjoyable, though we'd like a way of stringing them together without having to quit out to the menus — but this shortcoming, like so many others, is easier to pardon when sharing the space with a friend.

Among the things requiring forgiveness is the paucity of options; there are no visible leaderboards, even, which seems a betrayal of *C-Smash*'s arcade roots. Developer RapidEyeMovers has promised that updates are on the way, however, including a co-op mode teased in the demo but absent at launch. And in a way there's something refreshing about an online multiplayer game launching in 2023 without the usual glut of cosmetics and incentives, happy to be taken for what it is. That's certainly in line with the game's minimalist design — but it's hard not to wish we lived in the parallel universe where *C-Smash* arrived in its most complete form, with more to do, and less to forgive.

RIGHT Journey Mode's gradual voyage to the centre of the universe offers variety in the background environments without being distracting. Look out for fleets of spaceships modelled after Dreamcast controllers.

MAIN Matches can potentially go on longer the more adept you get, but it's also possible to set a timer to keep things short and snappy.

BOTTOM You can partially plot out a path for each orbit, the difficulty represented by how close or far away the nodes are. Curiously, explanations of power-ups seen on the left aren't displayed by default



ABOVE The space station's crew are a delightful bunch, who might be cheering you on from the bleachers during a level or busy performing gardening maintenance while you navigate the game's menu options

Oxenfree II: Lost Signals

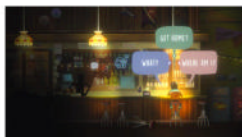
When Night School Studio's debut, *Oxenfree*, was released in 2016, it was more of a vibe than a coherent whole — it hardly mattered that its story about radios tuning into different planes of existence and unleashing ghosts made little sense when its teenagers in turmoil were so likeable and the dialogue some of the most convincingly natural we had encountered in a videogame. Seven years later, Night School is trying to repeat the same trick, while also attempting to answer a few questions left open by the first game — questions that arguably didn't need answering. Instead of Alex and her friends from part one, you meet Riley Poverly, who has just returned to her former home of Camena for a job in environmental research. Camena isn't far from Edwards Island, the location of the first game, the history of which Riley's research partner, Jacob Summers, is quick to summarise — including the disappearance of a bunch of kids off the coast of Edwards not too long ago.

You can play *Oxenfree II* without prior knowledge of the first game, but you will inevitably miss out on a multitude of references such as this. Riley and Jacob's job on Camena is rather simple: all they need to do is place a few transmitters on the highest points of the island. As soon as the first one is standing, however, strange things start to happen: Riley is thrown into different points in time and space, and voices giggle menacingly at her over her walkie-talkie. She encounters Olivia, a young woman who tells her to not get involved, before vanishing. Given Edwards Island's history with the supernatural, it's no big leap for Riley and Jacob to assume that ghosts have found their way to Camena, and that the transmitters will probably stop the dead from breaking through to their reality. In short, Night School has once again concocted a plot where logic takes a backseat. It's far from the first game to do this, of course, but *Oxenfree II* copies its predecessor in nearly all other ways, sometimes down to plot developments and the way specific scenes play out. Soon, it becomes clear that these aren't throwbacks but signs of a concept that didn't have enough story in the tank for a sequel.

This is even more obvious when you look at the elements the game introduces. The walkie-talkie, given to you to stay in touch with a fellow researcher, holds several other frequencies to unlock. This gives Riley an opportunity to talk to people besides Jacob, but it doesn't lead to any engaging side activities, nor any noteworthy conversations. Moreover, these exchanges don't come organically — you can only talk to your friends at certain times. And unlike most conversations in *Oxenfree*, interruptions (whether due to you changing locations and running into a loading screen, or the plot advancing) aren't natural either. Lines restart awkwardly, which is disappointing given the ability to interrupt conversations and pick them back up again was one of

Developer/publisher Netflix
(Night School Studio)
Format Android, iOS, PC (tested),
PS4, PS5
Release Out now

Camena was set to be *Oxenfree II*'s third big selling point, but the island falls short of its potential



RADIO GA GA

It's telling that, in an online featurette on its YouTube channel, Night School Studios has nothing more to add about the *Oxenfree II* soundtrack beyond "it's another Scntfc". Enough said. Andrew Rohrmann's soundtrack to *Oxenfree* was a major part of the overall atmosphere: a spooky mix of minimalistic beats, radio signals and distortion. The music in *Oxenfree II*, although generally less unsettling than its predecessor, is similarly outstanding, and contains plenty of references to the first game. It's worth taking the time to listen to the score in isolation, as a few tracks, such as No Exit, the single Rohrmann unveiled back in 2021, aren't really given the breathing room they deserve in the game itself.

the great, well, talking points of the first game. Another addition is 'time tears' — rips in the fabric of space and time that can be opened via Riley's radio. That you just happen across one and open it for the heck of it fits oddly with how the game otherwise tries to concoct explanations, no matter how silly, for its supernatural occurrences. This gimmick only crops up on a few more occasions, each time used to solve light environmental puzzles, with no bearing on the overall plot.

Camena was set to be *Oxenfree II*'s third big selling point, but the island falls short of its potential. Visually, it's once again a watercolour dream of the American Northwest, craggy enough that instead of just walking along trails, you'll have to do your fair share of climbing. *Oxenfree*, too, made you backtrack a lot, and while the sequel offers a few shortcuts, you still spend plenty of time retracing your steps. And with certain locations roped off until later in the story, it's not as if you have more freedom to choose where to go than before.

Last but not least, there's Riley. While it was the mix of spooks and teenage adventure that made *Oxenfree* special, witnessing events from an adult's point of view still could have prompted some intriguing revelations. Riley, however, is suspiciously quick to go along with the idea of ghosts being behind these curious events, and seems rather nonchalant about the whole thing. She and Jacob also follow the blueprint of characters Night School has previously given us both in *Oxenfree* and *Afterparty* — people who worry they may become (or have already become) deadbeats, held back by their environment psychologically and physically. Riley, like Alex before her, has to make peace with her past so she can face her future. Unfortunately, glimpses of her life before returning to Camena are few and far between. We see her sitting drunkenly at a bar, and falling off her couch among pizza boxes — suffice it to say, in terms of showing over telling, Night School has done far better.

Where *Oxenfree* had interesting relationships between its protagonists to uncover, Riley and Jacob lack the relationship history (and, let's be honest, the comfortable archetypes) that made the kids from part one such good company. Night School is still capable of beautifully articulating complicated human emotions in its writing, with characters pondering existential questions such as how not to waste your time and how to make an impact with others, but *Oxenfree II* doesn't manage to make us care enough for its characters, and worse, even manages to sour us on parts of the first game in its attempts to connect the two. It's disappointing mostly because its strongest elements, from its dialogue to its excellent soundtrack (see 'Radio ga ga'), are packaged within a limp rerun of its superior predecessor, providing scant few reasons to face the ghosts of the past a second time.



ABOVE The island of Camena has a certain rugged beauty – with the emphasis on rugged. You’ll do a lot of climbing, on which Jacob in particular isn’t especially keen. **RIGHT** You begin to realise things aren’t going quite the way they should when Riley finds her dad in a gloomy cave, even though their hiking days are long over



BELOW The transmitters Riley and Jacob place all over the island do something far more exciting than collect environmental data



ABOVE As in the original *Oxenfree*, you need to fiddle with mysterious machines in order to escape a time loop. Rather than finding a radio frequency, this time you create diamond shapes out of sound waves

Aliens: Dark Descent

Don't be fooled by *Aliens: Dark Descent's* generic X-COM wrapper. This top-down tactics game might borrow a few tools from Firaxis' strategic workbag — the base management, the deployment phase, the 'race against time' overarching narrative. But step outside the game's ad-hoc headquarters, the stranded spacecraft USS Otago, and your shoulder muscles will be twisted into knots by a very different kind of extraterrestrial nightmare. This is because it does what all the best tie-ins do, pinning down James Cameron's blockbuster and extracting its systems directly from the shrieking source. The result is a realtime blend of stealth, strategy and action where things go wrong agonisingly slowly, then terrifyingly quickly.

A mission in *Dark Descent* sees your reconnaissance carrier roll up to an Aliens-inspired location — be it a rain-slicked Hadley's Hope knockoff or a huge, cooling tower-shaped atmosphere generator — from which four Colonial Marines will descend the gangplank. These swaggering soldiers are controlled in unison, moving together with a click of the mouse, and deciding among themselves how to interact with the computer terminals and supply boxes designated by your cursor.

Initially, this system feels simplistic after X-COM's painstaking game of positioning and teamwork. Given how large and open-ended each mission is, the inability to split up and cover more ground feels restrictive. The reason for this apparent limitation lies in the blinking white dots that appear on your motion tracker in the bottom-right of the screen, every one of which can whisk isolated Marines away to a slow and terrible fate. When one of those dots spots you, the xenomorph it represents rushes at your squad. They will probably squash it without much fuss, blasting it automatically. But every alerted xenomorph triggers a hunt by the hive, and your team won't last long without more specific orders. Hitting the spacebar will either pause or slow time (depending on how stressed you want to be) and bring up a menu where you can issue special commands. You can instruct Marines to lay down suppressing fire to slow the aliens' advance, resolve a close encounter with a blast from a shotgun, or squirt the area with a flamethrower to form a xeno-cooking barrier.

These abilities are 'purchased' with Command Points, which regenerate over time. You only get a pool of three to start with, none of which offer any guarantees. A wily xenomorph might dodge your shotgun blast, while Marines can only suppress xenomorphs in one direction. Even if a Marine kills a xeno before it claws them, their reward might be a health-draining shower of acid.

Such encounters adeptly convey the frantic defensive combat of Aliens' short, sharp action scenes. But these fights play into the broader mission structure too. As in Cameron's film, you leave every encounter worse off than when you started, thanks to the two smartest systems

Developer Tindalos Interactive
Publisher Focus Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

Every alerted xenomorph triggers a hunt by the hive, and your team won't last long without more specific orders



HARD CORPS

Dark Descent's strategic layer offers few surprises, but in addition to letting you upgrade and outfit your Marines it serves an important purpose in compounding the pressure. Marines nearly always return from missions with physical and mental wounds, and must be pulled out of rotation for treatment. Moreover, the moon on which you're stranded grows more infested over time, so every day you lose to recuperation adds to the challenge faced by your soldiers. New days also bring new dilemmas, such as whether to spend supplies on extra medicine or have your Marines spend longer in recovery. Finally, a mid-act twist adds an inescapable deadline to when your repairs to the Otago must be completed, turning time itself into a precious resource.

in *Dark Descent*. The first is Stress. Accrued by Marines during every hunt phase, stress slaps them with a skill penalty at certain thresholds, making them shoot less accurately. The second is Alien Aggressiveness, which works similarly to Stress, but affects the xenomorphs. As it increases, more xenos will patrol the map. It likewise has designated thresholds: stumbling over these triggers a massive onslaught of bugs.

This is how *Dark Descent* teaches you to fear its aliens. Every encounter runs your Marines more ragged, intensifies the xenomorph assaults, and increases the likelihood of stumbling into another encounter. Hence, evading these critters is always preferable to confronting them, and you'll go out of your way to avoid their patrols, taking longer routes through the map, hiding behind cover to break line of sight, grinding your teeth as you wait for a xeno lurking in a vent to kindly beetle off.

Not that your enemies get everything their way. Stress can be relieved by welding the doors of a room shut, which, provided you have enough tools to do the welding, allows your squad to rest. Your ARC plays a role beyond inserting your Marines into the active zone, letting you fast-travel around the map, extract survivors and gun down any aliens foolish enough to crawl into sight. Most daringly of all, you generally aren't obliged to complete a mission in one continuous session. At any point during play, you can retreat to the ARC and return to the Otago, where for the price of a day you can rest, regroup, and spend the resources you collected on new weapons, equipment and tougher Marines.

The amount of consequential decision-making *Dark Descent* gets out of its linear campaign is impressive, as are the dynamic stories that emerge from those moment-to-moment choices. Hunkered against a wall as your sentry turrets burn through an alien horde, or chasing an abducted squad member through subterranean warrens before they get their chest cracked open, *Dark Descent* is a fine successor to Cameron's film.

Where *Dark Descent* strays from the source material is in the broader story it tells. There's nothing wrong with the plot structure, or in the vignettes spun through discarded datapads and encountered survivors. But its central cast is burdened with a clumsy script that lacks the humour of Cameron's roughnecks, or the heart of Ripley's bond with Newt. Your individual Marines don't have much personality either, and their repetitive barks eventually become more of a nuisance than the facehuggers that can hide within larger alien swarms.

If the characterisation outside of missions could keep up with the chaos inside them, Tindalos Interactive would have a classic on its hands. As it stands, this noisily tense yet quietly innovative tactical thriller must make do with being the best Alien-licensed game not made by Creative Assembly.



LEFT *Dark Descent's* protagonist is Maeko Hayes, a Weyland Yutani administrator overseeing the Marines' operation to escape the moon on which they're stranded. **BELOW** Marines earn promotions as they fight the xenomorphs, giving them access to character perks and specialised classes. You can also spend resources to unlock bonuses such as extra carrying capacity. **MAIN** The aliens will avoid fire if they can, making flamethrowers handy for defending your flanks and funnelling the creatures into traps. It doesn't always work, though, and flames can block your path as well, so deploy wisely



ABOVE Environments are evocative of their inspirations, but what grabs the attention more urgently is getting your Marines spattered by a corrosive acid burst, which can result from killing xenos at close range



Trepang2

There are moments of calm in *Trepang2* between the eruptions of screaming violence, but it's never truly quiet. The volume in this throwback FPS is stuck on max, from a rumble of music to a strangely aggressive crumple sound when you brush against a body. A sneaky opening sequence, which sees you freed from some black-site prison and left to crouch-run past the guards, already bustles with stamping footsteps and loudspeaker announcements. And that's before you pick up a firearm and unbottle the brewing cacophony.

Visually, *Trepang2* is more circumspect – a conscientious effort to invoke a mid-2000s aesthetic. The prison floors are an impossibly shiny grey, while non-illuminated spaces are pitch-black. Tables, stairs and shelving units are all sharp corners and plain functionality. Even when you're despatched to a castle in York, with its stately home décor, it retains a clinical edge. The audio, in contrast, is beastly and disruptive, a signal that you should make a mess of these neat spaces. 'Yes, this is a tactical shooter,' it says, 'but the tactics you should consider are how to wreak havoc in the shortest order possible.' Stealth is briefly acceptable only as a prelude to noise.

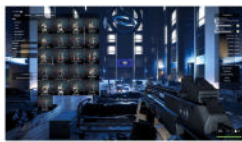
Subtlety was never likely to be a major feature in a game where retro-revival ambitions are pushed to the fore, a debt to Monolith's *FEAR* underlined in marker pen. Almost all the DNA from the 2005 game has been extracted for *Trepang2*. The plot is the same balance of military bravado and paranormal activity, with your character, known only as '106', taking vengeance on Horizon, the shady corporation that imprisoned him at the behest of his rescuer, the equally shady Syndicate. As 106 is some kind of super-soldier with otherworldly powers, that means others have them too, as you discover while chewing through Horizon's private army.

The core special ability in your repertoire has also been transplanted from *FEAR*. 'Focus' is a recharging resource that sends the world into slow motion – that mechanic so beloved in the post-Matrix era – providing seconds to raise a hell to which your opponents can't react. The visual effect has been lifted directly, albeit enhanced, with bullets gliding towards their target, shockwaves and trace lines visible, and comically elongated death screams. Still, it's no less mesmerising than it was then, and combined with the rest of 106's skillset, allows for wonderfully bloody mischief.

Again, as in *FEAR*, firearms are supported by beefy melee strikes, including a sliding kick that can take you through enemy soldiers, knocking them off their feet. It's an invitation to get up close, using Focus to reduce oncoming fire before tackling, spinning and finishing off a prone opponent. There are less chaotic options – the ability to grab a guard and take them down with a quiet kill, or trigger a few seconds of invisibility with your built-in cloaking device – but even these double

Developer Trepang Studios
Publisher Team17
Format PC
Release Out now

Visually,
Trepang2
is more
circumspect – a
conscientious
effort to invoke
a mid-2000s
aesthetic



WAVE MACHINE

Back at base between missions, you might take a spin on the combat simulator. There are 20 or so arenas to choose from here, unlocked as you progress through the main game, offering a kind of singleplayer horde mode. Enemies materialise in waves, granting cash once you bump them off that can be spent between rounds on supplies or summoning allies. As the game's main gambit for longevity, the sim is certainly capable of serving up intense firefights, forcing you to make the most of cover in cramped spaces. Yet it wants for variety, with the same weapons and similar patterns of opponents in each location. And with a minimum of 20 waves to overcome, it can be hard to find the impetus to restart after a failed attempt.

as means to narrow the gap between yourself and your well-drilled adversaries. Use that grabbed guard as a human shield instead, for example, or even pull the pin on the grenade he's wearing before launching him back towards his mates.

The mayhem that ensues in such circumstances only ramps up later, when the enemy gets more numerous and hardy and 106 injects a serum that enables him to dual-wield any weapon you can find in duplicate. The carnage-creating potential of wading into battle in focus mode with a shotgun in each hand has to be seen to be believed, while the game engine's robustness under such fire is a rare treat these days. For all its indebtedness to *FEAR*, there's a scale to the violence in *Trepang2* that goes beyond what was possible back then, with shell casings, bodies and fleshy chunks flying all around.

As succulent as the combat is, however, Trepang Studios struggles to build around it. To its credit, it does mix things up, using side missions to switch the linear trek through Horizon facilities for more concentrated objectives, and introducing supernatural elements to give you something fresh to worry about. Indeed, the anomalies you encounter, whether out-and-out monsters or more surreal phenomena, almost create the sense of a wider fiction in the vein of *Control*.

Yet potentially fascinating detours rarely turn into uniquely memorable levels, as each culminates in another massive shootout. In particular, attempts in a later mission to reprise some of the tension *FEAR* conjured with its psychological tampering seem like little more than treading water before an inevitable showdown. The boss battles are at least well-executed on the whole, though, and never more bullet-spongy than seems reasonably logical – although we can't pass here without mentioning the unfortunately silly mothman, who resembles a Scooby Doo villain racing around on his skinny legs.

Moments such as this also emphasise a reluctance to embrace how ridiculous *Trepang2* is, despite there being so much material for hilarity in the scale of its action. With 106 as a silent observer, it's left to enemies and occasional squadmates to provide commentary on what's happening, and they all stick to a kind of ultra-militarised oorah machismo, according to which the height of humour is calling you a bitch just before they shoot. It may fit the brazenness of the paint-bucket gore, but at the same time it can feel needlessly edgy.

But then, in full flow, the shouting just becomes part of the symphony again, gasping for attention amid rifle fire, frag grenades, and everything else. The roaring sound of battle drives us through countless skirmishes to an assault on Horizon HQ, set to the beat of a minigun. *Trepang2* may not know many tunes, but it truly commits to those it does.



ABOVE Enemy squads move in tactical patterns, lobbing grenades from distance and never intentionally crossing your line of sight. You're encouraged – and empowered – to close the gap to take them on



TOP In addition to taking out bosses, you're given a list of 'most wanted' Horizon targets that pop up during regular battles.

MAIN Some furnishings are prone to splinter and explode, but overall the scenery isn't as destructible as you might hope.

LEFT The game's old-school pretensions are complete with a sheet of unlockable cheats, although in practice many actually make the game harder

Master Detective Archives: Rain Code

Within the permanently drenched Kanai Ward, murderers go about their wicked business masked by a torrential downpour. The water level is rising and the body count with it. As amnesiac wannabe sleuth Yuma, should you fetch a mop or a magnifying glass? The prologue alone sees a death toll to rival an entire *Ace Attorney*. Wright would crumple at the workload; his hair wouldn't survive the weather. But what else should we expect from Kazutaka Kodaka, creator of *Danganronpa* and co-founder of Too Kyo, a supergroup of Japanese mystery aficionados drawn from games, anime and literature? As setups go, 'dare you cross wits with this lot?' is a tantalising one.

Kodaka's games have always been the unruly younger brother to Shu Takumi's classier whodunnits. They give us nastier slayings, crueller antagonists and unhinged solutions, the plots pulling more from the impossible-crime playbook of Japan's Honkaku writers than *Ace Attorney*'s crimes of passion. *Rain Code* is never as simple as a knife to the back, as bodies seemingly teleport from one end of a train to the other or, in one of the game's most audacious acts, are spread across four locked rooms to be solved in parallel. And when a knife in the back does finally manifest, it's somehow plunged into a target safely enclosed behind three layers of a security vault. This is enjoyably contrived stuff and, as mystery anthologies go, one of the more consistently ingenious.

Part of that ingenuity stems from the city itself. The corridors of Kodaka's school thrillers make way for 3D districts, presented in explorable chunks not dissimilar to a *Persona* map – and audibly alike, too, as Masafumi's Takada's dreamy lo-fi beats put you more in mind of burgeoning friendships than bludgeoning hardships. As a breeding ground for malice, Kanai Ward offers plotters more architectural quirks (bell towers, train tracks, flooded districts) to use. This is city planning as murder prep, and for avid mystery readers there's a definite charge in pottering around a space so synonymous with mischief that, as your detective mentor puts it, "screams sound like church bells at sunset".

But with extra real estate comes a struggle to fill its crannies outside the key story beats, a task that falls to unnecessary collectibles and sidequests that rarely evolve beyond ferrying answers between regions. The latter draws attention to the many loading screens; during tasks with multiple objectives you can spend more time on holding-screen tooltips than 'solving' the problem at hand. Paired with blurry textures, a stumbling framerate and often-malfunctioning reflections – a big problem in a neon city bathed in puddles – it smacks of ambition beyond the ageing Switch. It raises the question of how much is technically gained by leaving the constraints of a visual novel adventure (*Danganronpa* featured a 3D map populated by 2D character art) for something more fully realised. Better answers were found in *Paradise*

Developer Spike Chunsoft/
Too Kyo Games
Publisher Spike Chunsoft
Format Switch
Release Out now

A clocktower fall becomes a skydiving setpiece, while a drainage conundrum has you shattering giant fish tanks



SKILL GAP

In the world of *Rain Code*, master detectives must demonstrate a forte – a supernatural skill that renders the game's central agency as X-Men meets the Baker Street Irregulars. For Yuma, who can absorb others' skills, it enables a bespoke approach to each murder. A master of disguise lends himself to infiltration, while the gang's clairvoyant allows Yuma to see crime scenes as they appeared to the first responder, a skill put to devious use in the game's standout case. Alas, not all powers are made equal. Fubuki's ability to hop back in time could unlock all kinds of plot cleverness but is instead used to justify a sudden influx of split-second QTEs which she can handily rewind. She's a reset button in a swanky outfit, and deserves better.

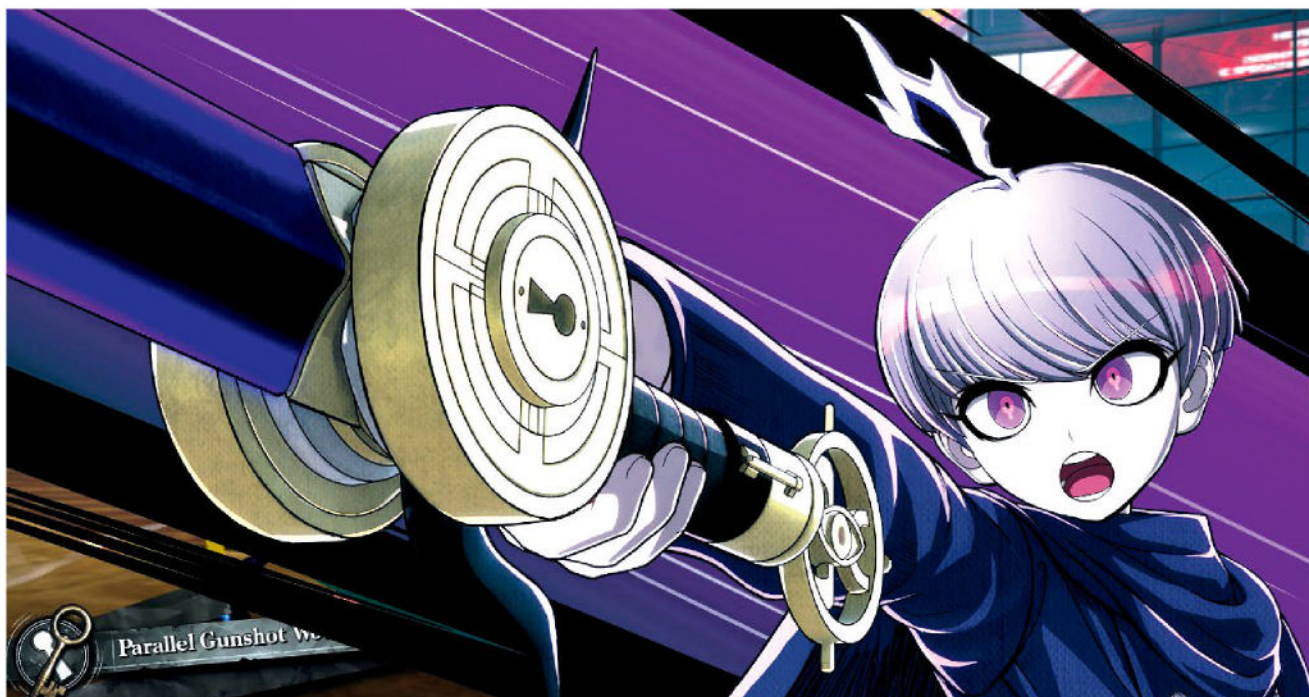
Killer, where the physical act of exploring an open world was closely intertwined with building your case.

The 3D jump better justifies itself in the Mystery Labyrinth, where Yuma navigates a garish casino-meets-Egyptian-tomb to eke out a solution to each case. Again, *Persona*'s surrealistic dungeons are a clear aesthetic inspiration, but this is no RPG gauntlet. Instead, Yuma is buffeted through a demented Takeshi's Castle-style gameshow, where minigames force you to draw quick deductions in order to survive. It's not miles away from the din of activities that comprised *Danganronpa*'s class trials – there you shot falsehoods with truth bullets; here you swipe lies with a sword of proof – but the more ambitious visual style allows motifs from each case to warp the world. A clocktower fall becomes a skydiving setpiece, while a drainage conundrum has you shattering giant fish tanks to proceed.

It's noisy set dressing; strip it away and you're presenting evidence and answering logic questions, à la *Ace Attorney*'s trials. But the difference lies in the nature of the crimes. Because they draw from 'impossible' howdunnits, smoking guns are in short supply. The path to the truth is circuitous as a result, and the Mystery Labyrinth becomes a neat attempt to give that journey physical shape. You'll often hit dead ends and park a line of thought to take a different route, chipping away at other inconsistencies to perhaps reveal a new angle on old facts and reopen a previously closed avenue. This is all done in a scripted, hand-holding manner – it would be fascinating to explore a more freeform maze – but it's always novel seeing detective games try to bottle that moment of breakthrough inspiration.

But if that makes *Rain Code* sound like a bookish endeavour, it's one that's slightly at war with an abrasive tone of voice. Not for the first time in a Kodaka tale, we're thrust into a world of discomfiting humour. Yuma's access to the labyrinth hinges on a pact with Shinigami, a demon who suggestively slides swords from her gullet, pukes up evidence, and spends the game grinding down Yuma's female friends in writing that's meant to suggest comic jealousy but often reads as straight-up misogyny. Watson she is not. Confined to Yuma's head, she can't derail the whole tale, but that sneering commentary is a jarring companion throughout.

This is a game of contradictions, then. It's an impressive exercise in mystery construction that often cringes at its own geeky strengths, masking its intelligence behind juvenile posturing. But at the same time its technical shortcomings rob it of that swagger, its anime stylings lacking the gloss you'd expect from the cocksure tone. Much can be forgiven when you're submerged in its waterlogged crimes, but you never quite shake the sense that *Master Detective Archives* is raining on its own parade.

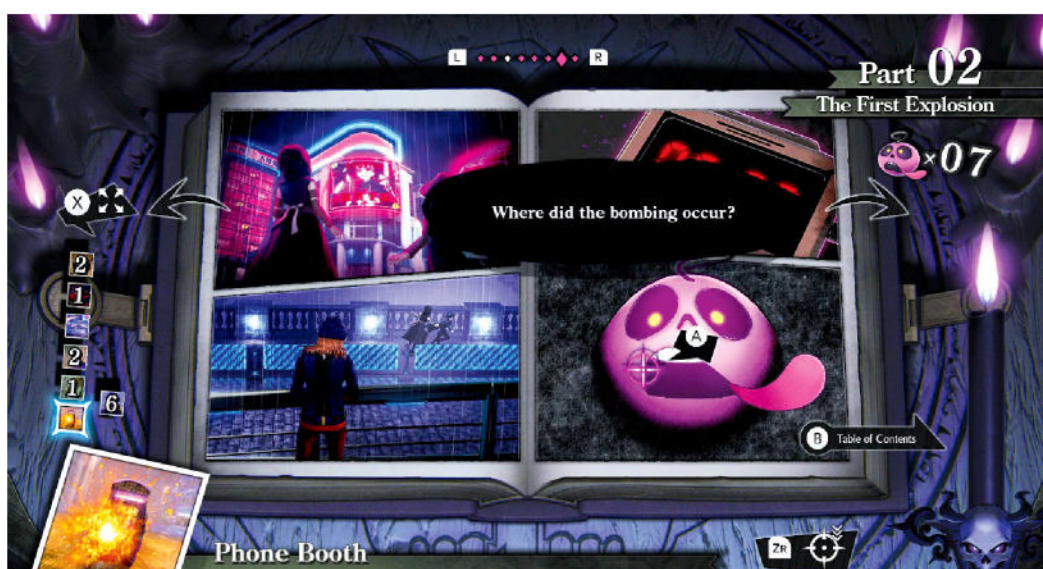


ABOVE While it amounts to little more than a QTE, visualising your final clash with the culprit as kaiju-powered castle assault does give each case a sense of cinematic catharsis missing in more reserved detective games

MAIN If the 3D models are a little on the rigid side, the use of striking illustrations give Rui Komatsuzaki and Shimadoriru's character designs the chance to shine.

ABOVE You're ranked on how smoothly you tackle the labyrinth, but generous checkpointing and Shinigami prompts subtly guide sleuths towards revelations.

RIGHT Reconstructing the crime timeline as a manga tests your grasp of the chain of events and ensures that you didn't make your earlier deductions by brute force



Synapse

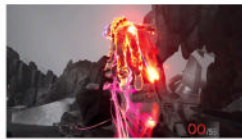
As arguably the defining tool of videogame interactions over the decades, it's been no surprise to see the gun carry over into VR – as lightgun-powered games of old taught us, point-and-shoot interactions are even more satisfying when carried out with your entire upper body. And at first *Synapse* seems to follow in the established tradition, offering a snappy update of *Time Crisis*.

Where in those games you might take cover by applying foot to pedal, here you can manually grab hold of any piece of geometry to pull yourself behind it, a method that can also be used to launch your own body around the levels. Reloading is made similarly physical, requiring you to slam an ejected clip back into the gun with the heel of your free hand, or indeed with any other body part or in-game object that proves convenient in the moment.

The game quickly changes tack, though, as we pluck a new ability from the skill tree's boughs (see 'Perma violent'). Now the telekinetic powers controlled with our left hand no longer apply only to static objects, but also to human bodies. Returning to life, we pluck our first soldier from the ground and, with an overarm heave, send them hurtling into the drink.

Synapse makes a strength of the graphical limitations that apply to VR. Its monochrome, brutalist world is highlighted with pops of psychedelic colour and swirling optical illusions straight out of Remedy's *Control*

Developer/publisher nDreams
Format PSVR2
Release Out now



PERMA VIOLENT

Synapse is in the modern Roguelite tradition, where even unsuccessful attempts contribute towards eventual victory. You earn points by completing various feats (kill 20 enemies with their own grenades, clear a level without firing a shot), then exchange them in the afterlife for permanent upgrades. Temporary 'Mind Hack' perks collected during runs shake things up more: we're almost grateful to have the ability to mind-control any TK'd enemy taken out of our hands.

With your two hands able to work independently of each other – and of where you're currently looking – you're able to deal with multiple threats at once, pulling off feats that would be simply impossible with a traditional control scheme and fixed perspective. This powers a good few hours of discovery, finding new ways to eliminate the cannon fodder *Synapse* throws in our direction in ever-increasing numbers. Bonked on the head with the crate they were using as cover? Tick. Flung into the sky and given the clay-pigeon treatment? Tick. Telekinetically 'encouraged' to jump on their own grenade? You'd better believe that's a tick.

But as the difficulty ratchets up, as it must to force players through the death-upgrade-repeat loop, we rely more and more on the ridiculous power in our left hand. After all, it's not constrained by ammunition or the need to aim – which is noticeably less forgiving here than in some other VR shooters, and harder work than the eye-tracking used to select telekinesis targets. A victim of its own success, perhaps, but it's too easy to ignore the flexibility of *Synapse*'s combat. And in relying on the same trick to succeed, we can't help but notice the repetition elsewhere: in the game's limited enemy types, in the short playlist of arenas you're shuffled through. Still, we reflect, while launching all our problems into the sea one by one, it makes a nice change from pointing and shooting.

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Roto Force

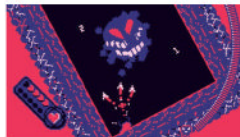
Picture a stray red sock, inadvertently thrown in with a white wash in a hand-cranked spin dryer.

Now imagine it darting around the drum, as if consciously trying to avoid turning everything else in there a fetching shade of pink. Surviving this chaotic twin-stick shooter — as a peculiarly nimble slug trapped within a series of geometrically shaped levels that move with you, each crowded with enemies — feels a little like that. Space, in other words, is at a premium, and touching anything (bar the odd bubble that contains a weapon or a restorative) tends to be a bad idea.

You have an ace in reserve, however. When dodging left and right isn't enough to avoid the abundance of projectiles and enemies heading your way — assuming they're either indestructible or you haven't shot them first — you can take aim at a safe spot elsewhere and launch yourself directly towards it. The trajectory of this trick shot can't pass through anything large and glowing, but you can carve through a hail of regular bullets without losing one of your five hearts. Over time you learn that staying alive is about being the calm amid the storm: with enemies darting, plunging and spitting out the other kind of slug in every direction, it can be tempting to move with haste. Hold your nerve

As rudimentary as it may look in static screenshots, there's a fizzing energy and character to the pixel art and animation, with regular palette shifts adding extra visual dynamism. The rotating menus, meanwhile, are a delight

Developer Accidentally Awesome
Publisher PID Games,
 East2West Games
Format PC
Release July 18



ORDNANCE SURVEY

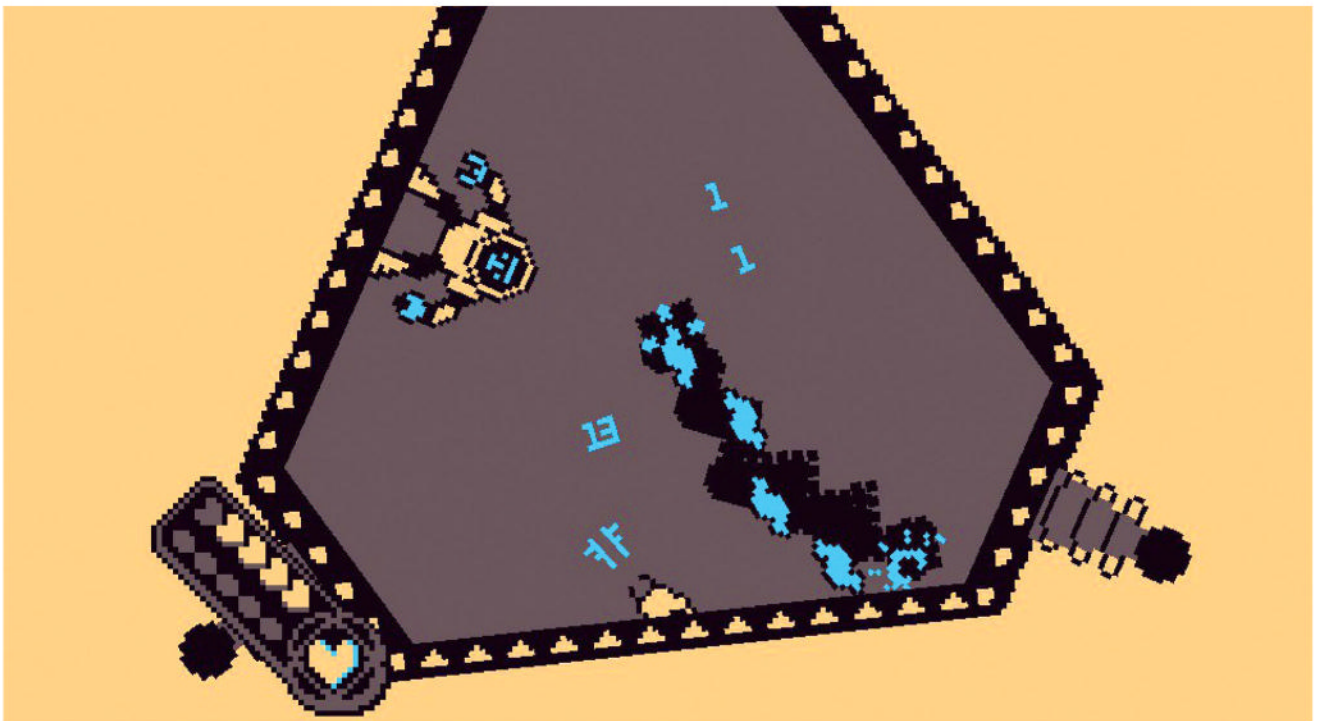
Stages comprise ten sections, with checkpoints after each from which you can restart, and an end-of-level boss. There's usually more than one choice of destination, so you can duck out and try another stage if you're stuck on a boss, though you'll need to finish them off to permanently unlock any weapons you've found. These range from flame whips to rift zappers, though nothing seems quite as useful as the homing shot, which naturally lets you focus more on dodging.

while preparing to jump and you can freeze the action to fine-tune those darts across the arena — and if you've gathered more than your maximum number of hearts, you'll deal damage on impact.

Sometimes, though, you really do need to hurry. With each new wave, *Roto Force* adjusts tempo and rhythm, finding new arrangements of enemies to keep you on your toes. Some split into smaller variants. Others move and fire restlessly. Some pause before launching an almighty barrage. Still more swoop, plunge and dart. A few even explode. There are environmental hazards besides — on an electric-themed stage, patches of blue encroaching from either side instantly spell bad news, while one environment forces you to consider how the ebb and flow of the tide affects your movements — and sometimes the fire button is left unemployed, as you're simply asked to avoid getting hit.

The surprises keep coming. While it's no shock that boss fights should up the ante, bosses make a virtue of their slight bullet-sponginess. By the time they fall, we frequently find ourselves desperately clinging to our one remaining heart — and when we don't, we know they're probably not done. Between the taut design and violent screenshake, *Roto Force* feels like the kind of game Vlambeer would still be making were it still around. Not only that, it would belong firmly in the upper tier of the Dutch duo's extraordinary catalogue.

8



Dordogne

After her grandmother Nora's death, Mimi goes to visit her house in the Dordogne region of France to find a mysterious box of memories. A journalist in her 30s, Mimi hasn't been back to see Nora since her last Dordogne holiday as a 12-year-old, which she no longer remembers. Her relationship with her family, largely expressed via tetchy text conversations, is fraught — as was her grandmother's. Seeking closure, she arrives at the old house only to discover that the items there trigger memories of a happier time.

Your interactions with these items have a satisfyingly tactile quality. You pick up a jug of milk with the press of a button and then tip it over a bowl of cereal with a flick of your cursor. You uproot weeds with wiggling motions. You slice potatoes for lunch with rhythmic button presses. Developer Un Je Ne Sais Quoi has found a variety of ways to translate everyday actions into simple motions, and none of them ever repeat. For most of the game, we look forward to discovering how Mimi will spend time with her grandmother next.

Two elements that seemed important at the preview stage — taking photos and taping sounds — are less essential than they initially appeared. Mimi does indeed take snaps, while collecting impressions (by literally

In this trip back to a place of childhood holidays, *Dordogne* perfectly advertises the joys of Southwestern France for both children and adults. It's a pity Mimi is limited in what she's able to photograph and record here

Developer Umanimation,
Un Je Ne Sais Quoi
Publisher Un Je Ne Sais Quoi,
Focus Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, PS5, Switch (tested),
Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now



JOIE DE VIVRE

Dordogne's creative director, Cédric Babouche, an established illustrator and comic book artist, is responsible for its distinctive visual style. If every frame in the game looks like a painting, that's because it is — Babouche has painted the locations around the Dordogne many times just for the joy of it before the game's inception. In the lead up to *Dordogne*'s release he also held live painting sessions, some of which can be watched on Un Je Ne Sais Quoi's Facebook page.

gathering words that are physically present within the environment) and recording the sounds of nature, before putting them all together as a collage in a scrapbook. In the final game, though, this functionality is truncated — photography is only possible at fixed points, if at all, while the recording feature goes mostly unused. Perhaps these are victims of time-saving cuts, but our Switch's screenshot button still gets a workout: *Dordogne*'s hand-painted scenes are a marvel to behold, with careful foregrounding and highlighting ensuring they remain readable. A pity, then, that the soundtrack is no match for the watercolour aesthetic, giving the impression of Vangelis falling asleep on his keyboard.

Despite its leisurely atmosphere, *Dordogne* is a more serious story than you might anticipate. The shadow of familial dissent hangs low over this 12-year-old's holiday, and Mimi can feel more a spectator than an agent in her own story. At the 11th hour, it introduces a plot thread that is difficult to fully understand without knowledge of 1980s French culture, and which detracts from the knotty interpersonal drama. Added complexity in an ostensibly 'cosy' game might seem welcome, but the otherwise strong writing becomes untethered when the adults take over. As such, *Dordogne* ends up straining to provoke an emotional response, when it's much more effective in those blissful moments when you can appreciate its wonders at your own pace.

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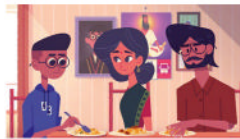
Venba

Venba pulls out her mother's tattered cookbook and frowns: a vital step in a handwritten recipe she'd been hoping to recreate for her husband's breakfast has been smudged. Achieving the desired result in Visai Games' narrative-led cooking game, then, requires you to follow the instructions you have been given and also figure out the parts you haven't. It's a neat way to capture the trial-and-error process of cooking an unfamiliar dish, but it doubles as a metaphor for its protagonist's circumstances. Having uprooted their lives to move to Canada, Tamil couple Venba and Paavalan likewise feel they're missing something. Can they – and you – adapt, without knowing what they're supposed to be doing?

What follows, interleaving meal-preparation segments with narrative sequences, explores food as both a binding and a transportative force. As the family grows from two to three (the way Venba reveals her pregnancy to her husband is adorable), we see the parents struggle to convince son Kavin to embrace his heritage: preferring to go by Kevin at school, he'd rather eat pizza than puttu, but is convinced to join his mother in the kitchen when she likens the cylindrical steamer for the latter dish to a rocket launcher. Elsewhere, tears and smears make a biryani recipe all but useless, until individual ingredients

Venba is short but there is rich storytelling flavour in every moment: the brisk animations of a late recipe carry a real sense of 'let's do this' purpose, while scrolling back through text exchanges delivers an emotional wallop

Developer/publisher Visai Games
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release July 31



GLORIOUS FOOD

Start playing *Venba* on an empty stomach and by the time the credits roll just over an hour later you'll be ravenous. Beyond making sure you add the ingredients in the right order, it's less concerned with challenging you so much as capturing the pleasures of the process – from turning on the radio to flipping a dosa, you're merely tapping or holding a button or rotating the stick. But between those simple interactions and the convincing sizzles and pops, it feels surprisingly like the real thing.

conjure memories that steer Venba in the right direction; later, the pungent scent of a spicy dish acts as a time-travel device, filling in the gaps of a forgotten memory.

Likely to be lumped under the 'wholesome' or 'cosy' banner, *Venba*'s narrative has its sweeter moments, but it makes you wait for dessert. This is at times a sad tale: the stoic grace with which Paavalan bears the indignity of being repeatedly turned down for jobs is particularly heartbreaking. His name being incorrectly spelled on his work lanyard is emblematic of the kind of microaggression minorities face – and, inevitably, worse is to come in a scene that is all the more enraging for its quiet understatement. Indeed, the visual storytelling is deft, with much said through simple but expressive animation: a slumped shoulder here, a downturned eyebrow there. It's hard to recall many games that have conveyed thinly veiled disappointment so affectingly.

While the specificities of lead developer Abhi's lived experience give *Venba* its distinctive flavour, they serve a story with which anyone can identify. From the ripped pages and blotted ink of that old cookbook to the light dusting of masala powder or scattered remnants of tamarind paste on its worktops, its keen investment in the messy, trial-and-error business of human existence is ever apparent. And each completed recipe reminds us that it's not our mistakes and misfortunes that define us, but how we respond to them.

8





STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl

GSC Game World's brutal nuclear wasteland
has only grown more thrilling with age

By EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL

Developer GSC Game World Publisher THQ Format PC Release 2007

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Come to *STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl* fresh from a younger open-world series and it may appear deliberately unfinished – an early-access build that never made it to version 1.0. Set in a radioactive psychic hinterland based on the 1989 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it's a work of unvarnished post-Soviet miserabilism, a resolutely fun-averse shooter consisting of dreary geography full of loveless mercenaries, ethereal deathtraps and malfunctioning guns. While badged as a horror game, it's more depressing than horrifying. And how much more miserable it seems in the context of games such as *Horizon: Forbidden West*, with their bright, exotic landscapes of smooth-swallow quests and conveniences, their magnetic mission loops, crunchy ability combos and syrupy insistence that the post-apocalypse is a place of possibility.

STALKER shares fixtures with these later games: it's both their ancestor and their baleful adversary. It has trading outposts, enemy camps, and replenishing loot caches, the rudiments of a Ubisoft worldbuilding playbook. It has maps and minimaps, even a magic compass that points to your next objective. Its story carries you through curated mission spaces as you hunt down the mysterious Strelok, who apparently lurks somewhere at the heart of the Chernobyl exclusion zone. You'll prowl the corridors of sunken silos, eyes peeled for the glimmer of a flashlight on a wall, and on the streets of Pripjat, the wretched city of Oz at the end of this radioactive-yellow brick road. But *STALKER* doesn't link these elements together as fluidly and gratifyingly as the *Far Cry* series would. And while its landscape teems with NPCs and mutant animals, all swirling about and raiding each other at the behest of the much-trumpeted A-Life system, it doesn't offer a "living, breathing world" as much as one that refuses to die.

GSC Game World's command of architectural detail is magnificent, given a morbid tolerance for shades of brown. Pripjat is an astonishing creation, a place of squares and rectangles that repeat from the soiled tiles and bricks of individual doorways to the corrugated skyline. The power station beyond

is a masterful exercise in finding the balance between authentic recreation and tailored playspace, with girders and wire fences along its flank that provide thrillingly sparse cover against snipers and campers. But the majority of *STALKER*'s landmarks are low and unpromising: artless chunks of concrete and rust, many already picked clean by rival Stalkers. You learn to avoid the buildings, which are often swamped in radiation that can only be fumbled around or powered through with a generous helping of anti-rads.

The world of *STALKER* never lures you towards its perimeter like the misty horizons of *Fallout 3* – that vastly more optimistic and playful, even triumphal vision of nuclear disaster, which launched the year after. It mires you instead, bogging you down in the rubble and threatening you with the possibility of surprise attack from any angle. The surviving roads leave you visible for miles, and funnel you towards ambushers. The offroad stretches are awash with flickering spacetime disturbances that crush or electrify or incinerate anybody daring to travel as the crow flies.

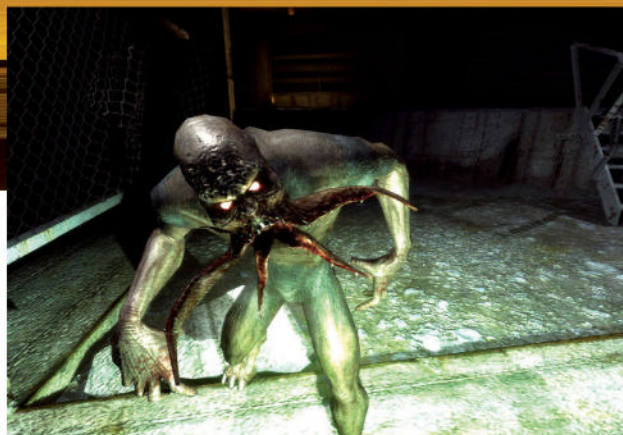
The countryside, meanwhile, has no glamour to it, nothing like the neo-barbarian or Gothic sublimity we're trained to expect of post-apocalyptic settings. At its least inspiring, *STALKER* drops you into openly videogamey jumbles of hills, crates and unconvincing trees under skies of raw sewage, fringed by impassable fences. On your first runthrough, you'll often navigate by fumbling along these boundaries, secure in the knowledge that you won't be attacked from at least one direction. The settlements, if you can call them that, offer scant intimacy. They're checkpoints and resupply areas for lone wolves, each with his (there are no women in the Zone) heart set on the rewards that await in the power plant.

There's a certain bonhomie to your conversations with other Stalkers at campfires, for whom you can do favours such as chasing off packs of mutant boars. You can also hire some of them as allies, but these are working partnerships at best, with few named faces to give the game a sense of society. The idea of building communities in a radioactive wasteland is, after all, a farce.

The active threats are at once murky and diffuse and grubbily mundane. There are ►

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mutant humans and animals, who are rarely scary but always a handful, especially the invisible ghouls who corner you underground, anticipating the water walkers of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. But the game's nastiest antagonists are just rival dudes in masks and fatigues — malevolent smudges on the geography, shooting you through gaps in gutted traincars and ripped piping. They flank, advance and retreat in a leaden, undramatic way. Unlike, say, the cackling Locusts of *STALKER's* contemporary *Gears Of War*, they don't feel like they exist to entertain you, and they reserve no special regard for you next to rival factions and the wildlife. The weapons, meanwhile, aren't vintage long irons or kooky atompunk improvisations. They are by and large ordinary guns of recent manufacture, rapidly aged by overuse and the Zone's supernatural



The game's supernatural enemies are cheesier than they are terrifying, though they're a fun challenge. We prefer the formless, hushed menace of the *Stalker* movie

configurations, thanks to the A-Life system. The abundance of half-visible or invisible terrain hazards obliges a meandering approach, navigating by feel rather than sight: you learn to strafe around anything halfway intriguing, listening for the crackle and whine of your various detectors.

This circuitousness breeds a forlorn quietude that couldn't be further from the hungry manner in which we move through

TODAY'S OPEN WORLDS ARE OFTEN FAR LARGER THAN STALKER'S CLUSTER OF LEVELS, BUT THEY FEEL SMALLER

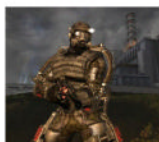
weather, passed around within a small population of warring pillagers.

If you're reading this and asking why you'd play *STALKER* today, the answer begins with how it teaches you to think about exploration. Today's open worlds are often far larger than *STALKER's* cluster of open-ended levels, but they *feel* smaller for how they draw and direct your attention, their objectives, cues, routes and landmarks arranged so that even the longest journey becomes a series of distractions. They are designed to reel you between waypoints. *STALKER* makes you stop and consider the earth underfoot, and is all the vaster for it. The absence of fast travel means you'll trek back and forth through areas, experiencing their layouts from several angles, at different times of day, and with different enemy

many better-known videogame environments. It's the part of *STALKER* that feels most like Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker* (both film and game are based on Arkady & Boris Strugatsky's novel *Roadside Picnic*). The film transports you to a dreamy purgatory of localised occult hazards which feel more like subversions of dramatic structure and cinematography than minefields. Characters travel cautiously across and around the perspective, rather than proceeding toward the vanishing point, dragging out each scene and so layering up the fear and wonder of the wilderness backdrop. In *STALKER* this idea is handled more reductively. Its anomalies are more akin to explosive oil drums, and a source of supernatural relics that are used to enhance your stats. But weaving in among them takes the same patience, cultivating a similar appreciation.



STALKER offers realistic gunplay physics. You can cheat at night by using the HUD's aiming reticule to spot hidden foes



RECYCLED GEAR

STALKER endures today thanks to its armies of modders, who have overhauled every aspect of the (initially buggy) 2007 game, adding widescreen support and ray-tracing, improving the gun handling, giving the player bodily animations, and replacing the sound effects, to pick just a few adjustments. The biggest of these mods are full-blown remakes: *Anomaly* knits a few of the original game's maps into one playspace, while *Lost Alpha* restores cut content, including the *Dark City*. These works are both engrossing in themselves and an interesting show of how *STALKER* differs from current shooters and open-world games: they both 'modernise' it and in some cases double down on its 'antiquated' features.

STALKER launched in the same year as *COD: Modern Warfare*, which offers its own take on Prip'yat – as clipped and surgical as *STALKER*'s is sprawling and ambiguous



The A-Life system allows hundreds of NPCs to act independently of the player's presence: monsters migrate, Stalkers eat and sleep, factions do battle. By era standards, it's an accomplishment

Though undersung in comparison to *Assassin's Creed* or *Skyrim*, *STALKER*'s influence on other games is considerable. You see it most obviously in the parade of *STALKER*-likes, some developed by other eastern European teams, from *The Farm 51's Chernobylite* to Big Robot's *The Signal From Tölva*. The standout imitators are 4A's *Metro* games, though these are just as much a departure for how they rig *Half Life*-style levels to Moscow's railways. You can glimpse *STALKER*, too, in blighted multiplayer survival games such as *Hunt: Showdown* and in the battle royale genre, which tasks players with gunning to the heart of a hostile environment. Other teams have discarded *STALKER*'s gunplay, the better to savour its geography and architecture – there are flashes of that wasteland ambience in many so-called

walking sims, especially those set in abandoned spaces, such as *The Town Of Light*.

But perhaps *STALKER*'s greatest legacy is the rediscovery of the real-life Chernobyl exclusion zone as a 'dark tourism' hotspot. GSC Game World's creation isn't the first or only contributor to popular interest in the site of the 1989 reactor explosion, but *STALKER* veterans are prominent alongside the *Fallout* players and fans of the 2019 HBO TV series who have visited Chernobyl – sometimes as part of guided package tours, sometimes by sneaking under the fence and hiking through the wilds, dosimeter in hand. Prior to Russia's 2022 invasion, the Ukrainian government had planned to redevelop the zone into an official attraction. While long contained, this calamity has the potential to spread, not least thanks to unwary visitors. Russian troops kicked up radioactive dust during their assault on the facility, and according to the Ukrainian state some have taken irradiated souvenirs to flog online.

All of which justifies *STALKER*'s grim view of humanity. We wouldn't be surprised to meet in-game fans of the game touring the Chernobyl of GSC's forthcoming *STALKER 2: Heart Of Chernobyl*. This isn't really a 'post-apocalyptic' story at all. The disaster it's based on is unfinished and unfolding, in part because people refuse to let it lie. Its wasteland is a portrayal not of aftermath but of a catastrophe that threatens to expand outward into the pre-apocalyptic world, a deathly pocket universe kept active by that most fatal of compulsions: curiosity. ■



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T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Marvel Snap

Developer Second Dinner Studios Publisher Nuverse Format Android, iOS, PC Release 2022

At the time of our review in E379, we couldn't be sure whether *Marvel Snap* was a work of genius or simply a compulsion. Months later, having kicked the habit a couple of times and come crawling back, we can see it's a little of both. But after hundreds of matches, that this tiny game — three lanes, a deck of 12, and still a smaller card pool than *Hearthstone* at launch — is able to produce moments of surprise at combinations and strategies we've never seen before? There's got to be a *bit* of genius in there.

Yes, every attempt to improve the game's free-to-play economy and progression systems has quickly come to nothing. The problem, as ever, being the need to serve players who are willing to spend money, those who are willing to spend thousands of hours, and players like us. And yes, the meta can occasionally get stodgy. (The Shuri/Red Skull and Black Panther/Arnim Zola periods were particularly tedious, and made thematically uncomfortable in their combos of Marvel's most prominent African heroes with its biggest Nazis.)

Part of what has kept us coming back, though, is seeing how Second Dinner addresses the state of the meta. The balance fixes now come once a week, and are accompanied by design notes that explain why, for example, Galactus now needs to be winning his lane in

order to destroy the rest of the board, and what other solutions were considered. For any student of game design, there are few better teachers.

Our latest excuse to slip back into the *Snap* habit, though, is Conquest. It's a new mode that takes as its basis the 'Battle' format used in friendlies, where the Cubes with which you bet are taken not from your player ranking but an in-match health bar. These matches run much longer than the standard two-minute format, but in exchange for the extra time investment you get a more consequential style of play, where both players study one another's decks from round to round, devise counters on the fly, and learn which cards mean it's time to cut your losses.

Conquest stacks these atop one another, requiring you to make it through between one (Bronze) and five (Infinite) of these multi-round Battles against different players to claim the prize, ratcheting up the tension each time you ascend. Arriving to our first Gold final with unearned confidence, we find our health knocked down to two versus our opponent's ten. It takes four whole rounds to claw that lead back — only to lose it on the final point with a bad misplay. We might fall short of genius, then, but the people who make *Marvel Snap*? Ask us in another six months. ■



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